



***Jizhu Xiangchou: Rural Nostalgia and Revitalization in Xi-Era China***

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## Table of Contents

<b>ABSTRACT</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>TABLE OF FIGURES</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>KEY DATES IN CONTEMPORARY HEYANG’S DEVELOPMENT</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>9</b>
1.1.1. Probing a Critical “Turning Point” in Contemporary Chinese Development	14
<b>1.2. Developmental Context: Setting the Stage for the Emergence of Xiangchou</b>	<b>17</b>
1.2.1. From the Procurers of Grain to the Provisioners of Labor	18
1.2.2. An Urban Disease	21
1.2.3. A Supposed ‘Human-Centric’ Urbanization	24
<b>1.3. What is Xiangchou?</b>	<b>26</b>
1.3.1. Xiangchou as a Nostalgic “Structure of Feeling”	28
1.3.2. Xiangchou and its Multiple Dimensions	30
<b>1.4. Chapter Outlines</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>CHAPTER 2. DESCRIBING THE SITE   A WALK THROUGH HEYANG</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>2.1. Heyang as an Administrative Village</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>2.2. A Walk through Heyang’s History</b>	<b>43</b>
2.2.1. Heyang: A Story of Origins	46
2.2.2. Heyang: A Story of Rarity	50
2.2.3. Heyang: A Story Out of Nothing	53
<b>2.3. The Development of Tourism in Heyang</b>	<b>58</b>
2.3.1. An Enthusiastic Start to Tourism	59
2.3.2. The ‘Official’ Start of Tourism	60
<b>2.4. Heyang’s Arrested Development?</b>	<b>63</b>
2.4.1. ‘Perverse Winds’	64
2.4.2. The Establishment of a New Governing Body	68
<b>2.5. Conclusion: Not another ‘Lijiang’</b>	<b>71</b>
<b>CHAPTER 3. FROM THE LOCAL TO NATIONAL; THE PERSONAL TO THE CIVILIZATIONAL</b>	<b>81</b>
<b>3.1. Research Methodology: Exploring the Site and the Self</b>	<b>82</b>
3.1.1. Participant Observation, Interviews, and Focus Groups	83

3.1.2. Reflections on Reflexivity	88
3.1.3. The Extended Case Method and its ‘Four Extensions’	93
<b>3.2. Jizhu Xiangchou and Rural Return: A National to Local Campaign</b>	<b>106</b>
3.2.1. “No One Left Behind:” Introducing the Rural Revitalization Strategy	108
3.2.2. A ‘Trickling Down’ of Discourse; an Intertwining of Xiangchou	109
<b>3.3. Jinyun’s Race Towards “Xiangchou:” the “Jinyun Model” of Rural Revitalization</b>	<b>110</b>
3.3.1. The Creation of “Xiangchou Industries”	112
3.3.2. (Re)branding Xiangchou for “Thriving Industries”	115
<b>3.3. Conclusion</b>	<b>119</b>
<b>CHAPTER 4. EMBEDDED MIGRATION, INNATE XIANGCHOU</b>	<b>121</b>
<b>4.1. Introduction</b>	<b>122</b>
<b>4.2. A Barren Nest: Heyang’s History of Migration</b>	<b>124</b>
4.2.1. Duck Tales from Xinjian: A Personal Account of Migration	126
4.2.2. Pride and Origins: Establishing the Culture of Migration	131
4.2.3. The Embeddedness of Duck Breeding and Shrimp Farming	136
4.2.4. Duck Breeding: A Cultural Industry	140
<b>4.3. A Culture at a Crossroads: Reconsidering Migration against the Budding of Tourism</b>	<b>143</b>
4.3.1. The Shifting Tide of Aquaculture	144
4.3.2. Five Stories of Return	148
4.3.3. Heyang, A Place with ‘Nothing to Do’	150
4.3.4. Employed by the Tourism Company: A Fragile Safety Net	157
4.3.5. Changing Values and Strategies: Making the Inevitable Return Permanent	162
<b>4.4. Conclusion</b>	<b>164</b>
<b>CHAPTER 5. RURAL RETURN: XIANGCHOU IN AN ERA OF ‘CRISES’</b>	<b>169</b>
<b>5.1. Introduction</b>	<b>170</b>
<b>5.2. Herding the Ducklings Home: A Letter from the Xinjian Township Government</b>	<b>172</b>
5.2.1. The ‘Big City Disease’	174
5.2.2. The ‘Thorny’ Issue of Rurality	181
5.2.3. A ‘Crisis of Legitimacy:’ Appealing to <i>Xiangchou</i> to Narrow the Urban-Rural Divide	184
5.2.4. Re-situating the ‘Chinese Dream’ in the Countryside	188
<b>5.3. From Xinjian to Heyang: The Dilemma of “Xiangchou Industries”</b>	<b>193</b>
5.3.1. The ‘Fordist’ Manufacturing of Xiangchou	194
5.3.2. ‘Capital Q Quality’ and ‘Capital X Xiangchou’	197
5.3.3. Rerooting the Uprooted: A Proletarianization Still Unfinished?	201
<b>5.4. Conclusion</b>	<b>206</b>
<b>6. ‘BACK DOWN TO THE COUNTRYSIDE’</b>	<b>211</b>

<b>6.1. Introduction</b>	<b>212</b>
<b>6.2. Internal Landscaping: Memes, Chicken Soup, and Attempting to Escape ‘Involution’</b>	<b>214</b>
6.2.1. A Soup of Acquired Taste: The Generational Divide	215
6.2.2. Ants at the Foothill of an Insurmountable Mountain	219
6.2.3. An Existential Spiral: From ‘Involution’ to ‘Inner-Revolution’	225
<b>6.3. Return Youth and the Revitalization Effort</b>	<b>228</b>
6.3.1. Heyang: The ‘Distant Land’	229
6.3.2. A Return Back Down to the Countryside?	234
<b>6.4. The New Youth in Heyang</b>	<b>240</b>
6.4.1. Ye Dong:	240
6.4.2. Zhu Zixiao	244
6.4.3. Fan Yongming and Chen Yangkai	248
6.4.4. Stationed in the Basin of Nostalgia, but Looking Ahead for a Future	254
<b>6.5. Conclusion: From <i>Zhiqing</i> Nostalgia to Xiangchou</b>	<b>259</b>
 <b>CHAPTER 7. CONCLUSION</b>	 <b>265</b>
<b>7.1 <i>Xiangchou</i> as a Framework and as a Keyword</b>	<b>265</b>
<b>7.2. ‘Notes towards the Definition’ of <i>Xiangchou</i></b>	<b>267</b>
7.2.1. What is ‘Xiangchou?’	268
7.2.2. On ‘Nostalgia’ and Xiangchou	272
7.2.3. The Chinese Countryside as a Target of “Nostalgic” Desire	276
<b>7.3. What is <i>xiangchou</i>, to whom does it belong?</b>	<b>280</b>
7.3.1. Villagers’ Chou for the Xiang	280
7.3.2. A Final ‘Tour’ Through Heyang	283
<b>7.4. Final Reflections, Limitations, and Future Research</b>	<b>288</b>
 <b>EPILOGUE: REVISITING THE E-COMMERCE COURTYARD</b>	 <b>292</b>
 <b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	 <b>299</b>

## Abstract

This dissertation probes a critical “turning point” in mainland China’s development. This turning point is characterized by an observable shift in the state’s developmental priorities from the urban to the rural, and a noticeable shift in official and popular discourses surrounding the concept of ‘rurality.’ Specifically, under the Xi-administration, and especially as evidenced by the state’s Rural Revitalization Strategy, I argue that there is a renewed urgency and call to action for capital – human, financial, and cultural – to be redirected out of China’s swollen cities and (back) into its depleted countryside. Meanwhile, whereas the ‘backwards countryside’ has been viewed as the underdeveloped antithesis to the ‘modern city;’ now, it is the ‘rural idyll’ that is framed as the desired escape from the ‘urban disease.’ Following decades of urban-biased development, China is now confronting a series of anthropogenic ‘crises’ across not only its political-economic and sociocultural landscapes, but to borrow from Li Zhang’s *Anxious China*, there is also a rupture in people’s “inner landscapes.” Recent years have seen not only a top-down imperative to build-up rural industries, but, critically, I also observe an almost ‘nostalgic’ yearning across society to literally or figuratively ‘return’ to the countryside. Using the ancient village of Heyang, situated in Xinjian Township, Jinyun County, Zhejiang Province, this dissertation illustrates how intersecting at these nodes of political-economic necessity, ecological urgency, and sociocultural and psychological desires to “return” to the countryside is the mandarin Chinese concept of *xiangchou* 乡愁. In the spirit of Raymond Williams’ (1976) seminal work, *Keywords*, this dissertation works towards a (re)definition of *xiangchou* as a critical *keyword* within contemporary China during a pivotal developmental ‘turning point.’

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## Table of Figures

Figure 1: Wall of Horse Heads and Pond .....	12
Figure 2: Eight Scholar Gate flanked by the 'Xihan' .....	50
Figure 3: A 'Shibajian' residential courtyard .....	89
Figure 4: Renovation sites within the GMJ using 'traditional' materials .....	98
Figure 5: A popular 'meme' on 'Gouqie' .....	218
Figure 6: A 'Hanfu' shop in Heyang .....	250

## Key Dates in Contemporary Heyang's Development

### 1994

- The Commission to Restore the Yiyang Zhu Clan Genealogy 《义阳朱氏家谱》 is established.

### 2000

- February 18: Heyang's Ancient Heritage Dwellings complex, *guminju* 古民居, is recognized by the Zhejiang Provincial government as a Provincial-level Protected Historic Cultural Area, (省级历史文化保护区).
- October 1: Heyang's tourism officially comes into operation.

### 2006

- February 5: Heyang Village is designated as a "Cultural Village" by the Lishui City Government (丽水文化名村)

### 2011

- January 28: The Jinyun County Government officially establishes the "Jinyun County Heyang Ancient-heritage Protection and Development Management Commission" (河阳古民居保护开发管理委员会).

### 2012

- November 23: The Zhejiang Provincial Department of Culture and Zhejiang Provincial Tourism Administration jointly announce Heyang's entry into the second batch of "Intangible Cultural Heritage Tourist Attractions" in Zhejiang Province (第二批浙江省非物质文化遗产旅游景区), in the category of "Folk Culture Tourism Village" (民俗文化旅游村).
- December 17: The Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development, the Ministry of Culture, and the Ministry of Finance jointly announce Heyang's inclusion into the first batch of "Traditional Chinese Villages" (第一批中国传统村落).

### 2013

- March 5: The National State Council includes Heyang Village's heritage buildings and structures into the seventh batch of National Key Cultural Relic Protection Units (第七批全国重点文物保护单位).

### 2014

- February 19: The Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development and the State Administration of Cultural Heritage jointly announce Heyang's inclusion into the sixth batch of "Famous Historical and Cultural Villages in China" (第六批中国历史文化名村).

### 2018

- Heyang: Applies for '4A'-Level Tourism Site Designation (attempt unsuccessful, reapplied in 2019).

### 2020

- January: Heyang receives '4A'-Level Tourism Site Designation.
- August 26: Heyang is entered into the second batch of National "Key Villages for Rural Tourism" (第二批全国乡村旅游重点村名单).

## Chapter 1. Introduction

Stationed strategically outside the parking lot, Mrs. Zhu's pancake stall is one of the first sights to greet a group of tourists at the gates of the *guminju* 古民居, the ancient-heritage dwellings complex that sits in the heart of a village named Heyang 河阳. As the visitors draw nearer to the ticket booth, it is the umami scent of the *meigancai* 梅干菜 – dried and preserved mustard leaves – that accompanies the sight of the pancakes. Their interests piqued and their senses tickled, the visitors make a mental note as they enter the official tourist site to pay Mrs. Zhu a visit before they leave Heyang's ancient dwellings, before they embark on their journeys back to the cities, back to their busy lives and respective homes.

Once having stepped through the ancient gateway, the visitors are greeted by a local tour guide, a former migrant who, once filled with homesickness whilst laboring elsewhere in the country, returned home to Heyang to find work in tourism. Led by the guide's enthusiasm and anecdotes, the visitors are sent through a journey underlined by nostalgia; both personal and cultural. Indeed, not a skyscraper in sight, Heyang stands as the ultimate antithesis to the 'modern city.' It is at once a representation of the romanticized rural idyll as well as a custodian of an agrarian culture and lifestyle that once was and still is. As they venture deeper into the village, the tourists find themselves among thousand-year-old structures, many of which are still homes to other villagers who have become part of the toured scenery, willingly or not. Now at the heart of the village, the visitors cast their gaze upon a vast pond. On its surface are mirrored reflections of the surrounding heritage dwellings, the village's newly refurbished cultural center, and the tiered intricacies of the 'must-see' site known as the *matouqiang* 马头墙, "Wall of Horse Heads" (Figure 1). The monuments' reflections in the water are a visual

reminder of the depths of their history; yet, ironically, the pond itself was constructed only in 2016 as part of the local state's initiatives to beautify the village and 'add value' to the tourism site.

Also new to the *guminju* are a group of young entrepreneurs. Born in the mid-late 90s, they, like the tourists, sought to escape their respective lives, homes, and jobs in China's urban centers. However, their stays in Heyang were intended to be more permanent. Rather than a brief tour, the entrepreneurs came to this village in search of their versions of the seemingly elusive 'good life.'<sup>1</sup> While it was a desire to remedy the *urban maladies* endemic to the 'post-industrial lifestyle' that compelled their moves to the countryside, it was generous policies and financial incentives provided by the local state that brought them specifically to Heyang – a village whose future depends upon the preservation of its 'pastness,' and is fully entangled in a tremendous top-down rural 'revitalization' effort. Moreover, these youth may have been socialized in urban China; however, they are only one generation removed from many who have grown up entirely as farmers in the countryside in Mao's China. For these millennials, the ancient village is a new and foreign place, however, reminiscent of their own grandparents' courtyards, it is simultaneously a nostalgic and familiar home.

In Heyang, these millennials run small boutiques that sell goods and services such as handmade Han-dynasty style hairpins and costumes for rent. As stipulated in their contracts with the local government, their commodities need to be trendy and appealing to the tastes of the visiting urbanite, yet still 'traditional' and able to both embody local culture and invoke 'rural nostalgia.' Their boutiques are tucked away in a residential courtyard behind the *matouqiang*. The conversion of this residential quadrant into a commercial one was also part of

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<sup>1</sup> For a concurrent study on the question of "what is a 'good life'?" see Xiaoxing Zhang (Forthcoming).

a top-down initiative to attract more talent and capital into the village. A bustling multihousehold and multigenerational home in its heyday, the courtyard became a multipurpose space shared between the urban(ized) youth and the local seniors who still own the land use rights of the quadrant, but who had agreed (albeit some begrudgingly) to the state's request to rent out their ground floor units for the purposes of development. Whereas the youthful presence of the entrepreneurs became a new addition to the lives of the seniors, the otherwise slow and quiet days of the new youth are temporarily disrupted by the chipper and curious group of visitors who have made their way into the courtyard, now known as the 'e-commerce courtyard,' *dianshangsieheyuan* 电商四合院. The tourists will breeze in and out of the quadrant. Some will pick up a hairpin or two, however most will leave with their bank accounts untouched as they make their way to one of the final stops on the tour, the famed *bashimen* 八士门, "Eight-Scholar Gate." There, they are instructed by the tour guide to rub the heads of two stone statues for good luck before leaving Heyang.

The tour bus is now in sight. Behind the wheel, a bus driver rubs the sleep from his eyes as he is awakened from his nap by the chatter of the of the now-approaching tour group. He runs the engine while he watches the group reemerge across the gate that delineates Heyang's 'old' village from the 'new,' the latter an extension of the village with modern rural houses built in the early 2000s. The tourists remember to stop by Mrs. Zhu's pancake stall before rejoining the driver on the bus. With the anticipation of posting their memories on their social media feeds, they watch Mrs. Zhu in awe through the lens of their mobile phones, recording her every move as she expertly slaps the newly formed pancakes into the clay oven. Four minutes later, the piping hot pancakes – locally referred to as *shaobing* 烧饼 – are pulled out by long tongs and slipped into thin paper sleeves, each printed with the now recognizable logo of "Jinyun

*shaobing*” 缙云烧饼, with the term “Jinyun” referring to the county in which Heyang is situated. Having been featured on national and even international television programs, this humble street food is considered a *wanghongmeishi* 网红美食, a viral food trend that has been flagged on many a self-proclaimed “foodie’s” bucket-lists. Its virality has brought much attention to the county, and local officials up to the provincial level have revered it as an ‘icon’ of Jinyun’s cultural heritage and nostalgia. Accordingly, it is valued by officials as one of the most critical and profitable local industries. Before taking a bite, smart phones are whipped out once more to not only snap a photo of the delicacy, (as they say, the phone eats first), but also to pay. With the convenience of AliPay and WeChat Pay, both products of China’s top tech companies Alibaba and Tencent, customers can scan the QR code that hangs beside Mrs. Zhu as she quietly kneads the dough for the next order.



*Figure 1: Wall of Horse Heads and Pond*  
Photo by Author

### 1.1. Xiangchou: A Critical Keyword in Contemporary China

Between Mrs. Zhu's traditional clay pot and her digital payment card, the dramatic pond and the historicity of the walls that it reflects, and the sharing of space between the urban(ized) youth and their rural hosts, Heyang has become the site for multiple encounters across the spectrum of the traditional and the modern, the urban and the rural, the old and the new, the culturally valuable and the commercially profitable. It is within these encounters where the developmental dilemmas and potentials that face China's rural in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are most salient; it is a complex crossroad of preservation versus development, between historical integrity versus marketable commodity, and a tenuous dance between villager welfare, state control, and commercial interest. Indeed, within China's broader developmental context in the Xi Jinping era, Heyang, like countless other villages across the Chinese rural landscape, has become the destination for various return flows of people, policies, and capital from both the top-down as well as the bottom-up. A tour through Heyang is at once a journey through the physical and temporal landscapes of China's 'cultural heritage,' as well as a journey through a transforming political economy, wherein the rural, in many respects, is being valued increasingly as the 'final frontier' for development and investment. At the same time, a visit to Heyang is also a venture into the visitors', newcomers', government officials', as well as the remaining and returning locals' affective landscapes of nostalgia, homesickness, and even a sense of concern for the countryside. Although it is the sights to see, the ancient tales to hear, the pancake that may be tasted and the hairpins purchased, it is in this ancient village where the 'modern citizen' ultimately goes to consume, materialize, and become part of the production of *xiangchou* 乡愁.

### 1.1.1. Probing a Critical “Turning Point” in Contemporary Chinese Development

Commonly translated as the English terms, “nostalgia” and “homesickness,” *xiangchou* is a concept imbued with much historical and cultural meaning. However, just as amorphous as the notion of “nostalgia,” and just as ambiguous as the idea of the “home” for the global(ized) citizen, *xiangchou*, is a term worth being (re)defined. In the spirit of Raymond Williams’ (1976) seminal work, *Keywords*, this dissertation therefore begins with an extended inquiry into the meaning and materiality of *xiangchou* in the context of Xi-era China. Moreover, my interest in *xiangchou* is inspired by Williams not only in the spirit of (re)defining a cultural terminology, but also by his late 20<sup>th</sup> century musings on the “country and city” (Williams, 1993). That is, his observations of a troubling and yet-to-be reconciled separation of the urban and the rural, of humans from nature, of the manufactured world from the natural world, and the unresolved tensions that have grown out of these rifts.

Accordingly, this dissertation uses *xiangchou* as theoretical lens to probe a critical “turning point”<sup>2</sup> in contemporary mainland China’s development. This turning point is characterized by a shift in both the state’s developmental priorities from the urban to the rural, as well as a shift in the popular perceptions towards the concept of ‘rurality.’ Specifically, under the Xi administration, and especially as evidenced by the state’s ambitious and seemingly comprehensive Rural Revitalization Strategy (*xiangcun zhenxing zhanlue* 乡村振兴战略) there is a renewed urgency and call to action for capital – human, financial, and cultural – to be redirected out of China’s swollen cities and into its depleted countryside. Meanwhile, whereas the ‘backwards countryside’ was viewed throughout contemporary history as the

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<sup>2</sup> I owe the term “turning point” to Professor Xiang Biao, who suggested the term during our very constructive discussion as part of my confirmation of status, a doctoral mid-term review that is a critical milestone for DPhil Candidates at the University of Oxford.

underdeveloped antithesis to the ‘modern city;’ it is now the ‘rural idyll’ that is framed as the desired escape from the ‘urban disease.’

Indeed, following years of unfettered urbanization, ecological degradation, and a still-concerning urban-rural divide that is simultaneously the cause for and result of a dramatic exodus of labor depletion from rural economies; China is confronting a series of anthropogenic ‘crises’ across not only its political economic and sociocultural landscapes, but to borrow from Li Zhang (2020), there is a deep rupture in people’s “inner landscapes” as well. In other words, contemporary Chinese society is also afflicted by a rising and deepening mental health crisis. Within such a context, I argue that recent years have seen not only a top-down imperative to build-up rural industries and economies, but, critically, I have also observed from the bottom up an almost escapist and ‘nostalgic’ yearning across various strata of society to literally, digitally, or figuratively go (back) to the countryside – whether real, imagined, or symbolic. Intersecting at each of these nodes of political-economic necessity, ecological urgency, and both sociocultural as well as psychological desires for a “rural return” is *xiangchou*. This dissertation ultimately posits that during the Xi-era, *xiangchou* emerged as a prominent term pertaining to China’s countryside and, critically, to the urgent task of its revitalization. By the late 2010s, *xiangchou* was *materialized* as a discourse to not only mobilize efforts for rural development through affect, but it also became the *means for* revitalization in the form of tangible commodities, services, entire industries, and, as I illustrate through my case study of Heyang village, an entire cultural and political economy.

Drawing from the traditions of the Extended Case Method (Burawoy, 2009),<sup>3</sup> I use the rural tourism industry surrounding the ancient village of Heyang 河阳村, situated in Xinjian

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<sup>3</sup> See chapter 3 for research methodology and chapter 2 for a profile of Heyang village and its history.

Township 新建镇, Jinyun County 缙云县, Lishui City 丽水市, Zhejiang Province 浙江省, as a case study to explore both the *affective* qualities of *xiangchou* as a form of nostalgia, homesickness, and topophilia for the countryside; as well as the *effective* usage of *xiangchou* as a mobilizing discourse to implement and execute various rural revitalization campaigns and policies in small towns and villages. Within China's broader developmental context in the Xi Jinping era, countless traditional villages across the mainland Chinese rural landscape have become the destination of various return flows of human, financial, and cultural capital. In Heyang, I trace various 'return flows' that meet in the village and observe how these flows and their processes ultimately interact with and impact the village and its residents for better and for worse. Anecdotal and empirical evidence provides a journey through Heyang's modern historical, developmental, and sociocultural landscapes, to ultimately illustrate how these return flows are at once motivated by a political imperative to revitalize the countryside, a socioeconomic necessity to narrow the urban-rural divide, an ecological urgency to rectify years of environmentally damaging practices in the name of 'urbanization' and 'modernization,' and, finally, a genuine desiring for the symbolic and literal home-village. Put differently, these return flows are compelled and depicted by what Karl Marx (1852) explains as the "dull compulsions of economic relations" on the one hand; and what I describe as an "affective devotion of cultural attachments" on the other. *Xiangchou* – simultaneously effective in its usage, and affective in its meaning – sits at the intersection of both.

Before using *xiangchou* as a way to make sense of the above-mentioned 'flows,' it is necessary to, firstly, set the developmental context that has led to the emergence of this "turning point." Secondly, in order to 'redefine' *xiangchou* as a critical keyword in contemporary China, it is necessary as well to explore its meaning and its various interpretations and understandings

– indeed; what is *xiangchou*? This introductory chapter therefore begins by providing a historical overview of China’s development from the Mao-era to the Xi-era, highlighting the formation and intensification of the urban-rural divide during a condensed and intensive period of urban-biased ‘modernization.’ What follows is an inquiry into *xiangchou* in its various contemporary uses leading up to its adoption as a discursive device that has contributed to the reframing of the ‘language’ surrounding rurality and the peasantry in Xi-era China. I illustrate how *xiangchou*, generally understood as a form of reminiscence moves beyond the realms of affect and emotionality to become *Xiangchou* with a ‘capital X.’ Indeed, it transcends the realms of a “structure of feeling” (Williams, 1977) to become itself a top-down call to action and course of action; itself the ends and the means as a fully articulated top-down strategy for development. Moving into the 2010s, I then trace the gradual folding of the term into the Chinese state’s discourse of development, highlighting one of its first high-profile utterances by Xi Jinping in 2013. This brings the discussion into Xi’s second term of presidency in 2017, which saw the introduction of the Rural Revitalization Strategy, and which lays the groundwork for the following chapters to probe the cultural and material embedding of *xiangchou* in the context of Heyang village.

## **1.2. Developmental Context: Setting the Stage for the Emergence of Xiangchou**

‘Development’ has long been a highly urban-centric project in China’s contemporary history, and an “urban bias” has arguably existed since the inception of the People’s Republic of China, even despite Mao Zedong’s rhetorical and revolutionary focus on the peasantry (for “urban bias,” see for instance Nolan & White, 1984; Oi, 1993). In fact, as early as 1949, Mao proclaimed to the entire Party during the second plenary session of the seventh central committee that it was the time to shift the centre of gravity of the Party’s work from the village

to the city (Mao, 1949). The rural had played its role during the revolution, and according to the newly victorious Chinese Communist Party, it had become a national imperative “to do [the] utmost to learn how to administer and build the cities” (Mao, 1949), but on the caveat that “under no circumstances should the village be ignored and only the city given attention” (Mao, 1949). However, as Martin Whyte (2010) observed, “Mao Zedong and his colleagues ended up pursuing a vision of socialism that was every bit as biased toward the cities and industrial development and against agriculture and rural residents as the versions promoted by Marx, Lenin, and Stalin before them” (p. 9). In other words, the socialist government imagined urban and rural societies to serve completely different functions in what was ultimately a developmental strategy that depended upon the extraction of agricultural products from rural areas to feed industrialization (Naughton, 2007, p. 115). Epitomized by the ill-fated Great Leap Forward campaign (1958-1962) and its alarming consequences, this relationship of extraction consequently planted the seeds for the deep urban-rural divide that continued into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **1.2.1. From the Procurers of Grain to the Provisioners of Labor**

During the Mao-era, two drastically different administrative systems were used to govern the city and countryside, creating a reality where, among other developmental imbalances and socioeconomic inequalities, “rural residents were poorer than urban residents, and they had a cheaper and less comprehensive set of social institutions to serve them as well” (Naughton, 2007, p. 115). Rigid policies, notably the household registration (*hukou* 户口) system, were installed to control and monitor the flow of people, resources, and capital, effectively putting in place a tightly sealed and monitored barrier between the urban and the rural. Although the reform and opening up era loosened these controls and re-allowed internal

migration, China still resembled what could be aptly described by Whyte's 2010 brilliantly titled edited volume as "one country, two societies." Furthermore, despite Deng Xiaoping's relatively successful rural reforms during the early market transition years, the urban bias continued to grow and deepen, clearly manifesting itself in all aspects of the Chinese state's policies and projects. While the socialist era saw the extraction of resources from the countryside to feed industrialization in the CCP's aspiration towards a "New China," *xinzhongguo* 新中国; the millions of migrant labourers and the emergence of such discourses as the *sannong* 三农 "three-rural" issue – the plight of farmers, agriculture, and rural areas – represented another form of extraction from the countryside and exploitation of the peasantry. Whereas the socialist-era's form of rural exploitation fuelled a vision of self-sufficient industrialization, agriculture and rural labor facilitated the state's fervent urbanization drive as the country integrated itself into the global market economy. With the supposed ideal image of 'modernity' represented by the city and China's future envisioned as urban, the social and political development of the rural, meanwhile, was 'left behind' in the construction of a 'modern China.'

Since the inception of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the countryside has played an invaluable role in the construction of contemporary China's urbanity. However, in this process, it was the lives of the rural and the status of rurality that remained undervalued and more or less untended to. China's urbanization and development have been the result of a complex negotiation between planned economy and market capitalism – indeed, "socialism with Chinese characteristics," or, to borrow from Yasheng Huang (2008), "Capitalism with Chinese Characteristics" – and it was upon the backs of those considered and treated as second-class citizens from which China's first-class cities were built. China's fervent and rapid development has profited from the mobility of its massive reserve force of labor from the countryside,

forming the now infamously beleaguered subjectivity of “rural migrant worker,” *nongmingong* 农民工 (Pun & Lu, 2010; Chan & Selden, 2017). They were (in)dispensable – a valuable source of labor and production, but a readily removable body that could be sent right back to their respective rural hometowns when labor was in surplus. Meanwhile, China’s countryside was dwindling.

As cities were emerging, entire villages were literally vanishing. According to Ian Johnson (2014) for the *New York Times*, villages were disappearing at the alarming rate of 300 per day between 2000 and 2010. In other words, over a million villages were lost during a decade. To be sure, some villages came to their natural end, as flora and fauna (re)claimed their earth. However, most were left “hollow[ed] out’ and quickly ‘growing grey’” (Davis, 2014, p. 28). The working force departed, leaving the village to vanish quietly alongside the most vulnerable and elderly – the “left behind” – who slowly returned one by one back to the soil as well. Meanwhile, other villages were prematurely and often brutally grazed down to make way for new developments. Although certainly alarming and a cause for concern, what is often overlooked by articles in such publications as the *New York Times*, however, is that the rate of village ‘disappearance’ needs to also take into account the systematic restructuring that the central government has implemented over the years to ‘streamline’ rural and regional governance. Through this process, hundreds of thousands of natural villages<sup>4</sup> were administratively ‘swallowed’ up by a village amalgamation drive that drastically reduced the number of villages from an administrative point of view overnight. Although villages did not ‘disappear’ *per se*, consequences including cultural loss and a disruption and discontinuation of

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<sup>4</sup> A ‘natural village’ defines a settlement that has existed historically, whereas an ‘administrative village’ refers to the most basic unit of administration in contemporary China. I explain this in more detail in chapter 2, p. 37.

village(r) identity was a product of this amalgamation. Moreover, while much of this ‘disappearance’ of rural areas is an inherent process of industrialization and urbanization, it was the often regrettable and irretrievable loss of rural culture and both intangible and tangible cultural heritage that began raising alarms. In fact, in a bid to preserve China’s rural heritage, a comprehensive effort to identify and catalogue ‘traditional villages’ was launched in 2012. It was spearheaded by Feng Jikai 冯骥才, a cultural scholar, artist, and a counsellor to the CCP’s State Council. To illustrate the importance of Feng’s mission, the cataloguing effort was jointly carried out by the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development, the Ministry of Culture, the State Administration of Cultural Heritage, as well as the Ministry of Finance. As a result, 646 villages, including the village of Heyang, were entered into the first iteration of this catalogue. A year later, an entire institution backed by state funding was created within the University of Tianjin under the name of “China’s Traditional Village Protection and Development Research Centre.” By 2015, over 2,555 villages were entered into the “Traditional Chinese Village Catalog” (China Daily, 2015) Suffice it to say, the preservation of China’s villages became an endeavor of national significance.

### **1.2.2. An Urban Disease**

Ironically, it was during the 2000s-2010s when urbanity was quietly plagued by a form of cultural existentialism too. As many rural residents were either uprooted to become migrant laborers or displaced as their hometowns literally vanished; it was during this time when the concept of ‘home’ became an elusive concept for city-dwellers as well. Anonymous high rises arose where childhood and cultural sites once stood, illustrating how China’s dramatic urbanization represented a paradoxical and rapid process of construction versus destruction, displacement and replacement, and of modern advancement versus cultural loss (Qian, 2017).

Meanwhile, at the individual level, the simultaneously exciting and aggressive processes of globalization produced what cultural critic Dai Jinhua (1997) described as “the most chaotic identity crisis in many decades,” where, surrounded by forests of anonymous skyscrapers, even “a ‘homegrown’ Chinese is suddenly stripped of hometown, homeland, and home country and abandoned to the beautiful new world” (p. 146). In addition to the drastic altering of landscape, a cultural, sociopsychological, and even ideological shift was taking place as well. This was best encapsulated by a series of tourist memorabilia easily purchasable at any of China’s main tourist destinations that featured an image of chairman Mao over the phrase, “to serve the RMB” *weirenminbifuwu* 为人民币服务 – a clever play on words replacing the CCP’s slogan of “to serve the people,” *weirenminfuwu* 为人民服务, with a new meaning of everything in the service of money. Although merely a farce to bemuse shoppers, (including myself during my trips to the ‘motherland’ in the early 2000s as a young child), the underlying reality was not lost on scholars such as Wang Ban (2002), who observed what could be described as a concerning shift to the integrity of social relations and humanism in a “fluid, bloodless cash nexus, [where] emotionally and ethically charged social relations are reduced to the bare bone of money relations” (p. 674). Even though both Wang and Dai were writing to depict the sociocultural and developmental dislocation and dissociation felt at the beginning of China’s reforms, their words remained relevant throughout the era, as their echoes reverberated quietly between the empty buildings of ghost cities – the products of capital overflow and parasitic and unsustainable urban sprawls.

To illustrate the severity and consequences of such sprawls and unfettered development, I include a quote from scholar and urban-preservation expert Zhang Song, who, during an interview with *ChinaDialogue* in 2010, cautioned the following:

the cities in the Yangtze River and Pearl River deltas are expanding outwards, [and] if you include industrial zones, villages and towns, plus all the highways and rail lines, human construction may have already reached an ecological limit. (Zhang S., 2010)

Indeed, the Party-state may have had a heavy hand in the progression of China's urban development, but "a complete commercialized mode of development" had taken over (Zhang S., 2010), greatly compromising the quality of urban spaces and urban life. Such a mode of development is ultimately capital and profit driven; it was 'urbanization' dictated by the ongoing accumulation of capital on the one hand, and its dispersing on the other. The 'dispersal' of capital takes the form of cheap construction that utilizes even cheaper labour, which is at the cost of both the natural environment that is destroyed and the lived environment that is built in the name of 'development.' Chinese urbanity had become afflicted by an *urban disease*, while rural China was simultaneously hollowing out and producing a precarious class of uprooted migrant labourers caught in between.

Urbanization is a process involving more than just relocation, construction, and the physical expansion of cities. It means building new communities and social infrastructures such as the provision of adequate and affordable housing and access to medical care. Yet, in its mad dash to 'modernize,' this opened the floodgates for a profit-driven real estate industry that sprawled and spiralled beyond the single-party state's control. Somewhere along the road, consideration for peoples' livelihoods, the preservation of culture, and the state of the environment were factored out of the equation, challenging any notion of sustainability within this model. Therefore, China's ongoing urbanization became a central focus for the Party-state, which was about to undergo a dramatic transition of leadership in 2013. And indeed, as Xi Jinping claimed the title of China's new President and the General Secretary of the Party,

bringing the focus of urbanization “back to the people” was precisely what the new administration sought to achieve.

### **1.2.3. A Supposed ‘Human-Centric’ Urbanization**

Suffice it to say, urbanization has been central to the Chinese state’s growth strategy; however, as the above has illustrated, this highly planned and aggressive expansion of cities has come with tremendous sociocultural, political economic, and environmental costs; so much that this prompted the current administration to hold its first conference dedicated to urban work in thirty-seven years. With a great sense of urgency, the new Xi administration held its landmark Central Urbanization Work Conference (CUWC) on December 18, 2013, and it is now considered as “the most high-level meeting the Chinese leadership has ever convened on urbanization” for several reasons (Tiezzi, 2013). For one, this CUWC took place as a standalone meeting alongside the highly anticipated Central Economic Work Conference, and it was attended by all the highest echelons of state power under the intent gaze and scrutiny of China observers around the world. It is therefore arguable that it had become a national imperative to re-evaluate the nature of China’s ongoing process of urbanization, and, by extension, to address pressing concerns including China’s urban-rural divide, the state of the environment, and the integrity of society and culture.

Moreover, the convening of this landmark conference marked a crucial turning point in China’s development. As reported by Ma Chi (2015) for one of Beijing’s bilingual mouthpieces, the *China Daily*:

China is in a crucial transition period from a rural society to urban society. The process of urbanization led to a range of problems, such as air pollution, congestion, too much garbage and a lack of cultural identity. To cope with these problems and make the development of cities sustainable, a top-level design is urgently needed. That's why the

Central Urban Work Conference was held. (Ma, 2015)

Accordingly, the 2013 CUWC emphasized that China's ongoing – and, of course, heavily centrally-planned – process of urbanization should henceforth focus on being more sustainable and “human-centred.” This was also emphasized in the new National-New Type Urbanization Plan (NNUP), a document resulting from the CUWC that was intended to be the blueprint for China's developmental model for 2014-2020. What was said to qualify this model as being a “new-type” of urbanization was its emphasis on being “human-centric,” green, and wholly integrative between city and nature and between city and countryside. Or, to put this in party rhetoric, China's development needed to prioritize “clear waters and green mountains” over the pursuit of “mountains of gold and silver” (Xinhua, 2013). Meanwhile, development should uphold the tenets of the NNUP by forging ahead with an urbanization that should, in Xi's now highly quoted and recirculated phrase: “let cities merge with nature, let citizens gaze at mountains, see waters, and to *jizhu xiangchou* 记住乡愁” (Xi, quoted in Xinhua, 2013).

Indeed, while Xi's references to mountains and bodies of water are straightforward calls for a more environmentally conscious model of urbanization, his mention of *jizhu xiangchou* – to “remember *xiangchou*” – is arguably more ambiguous, and particularly so in the English language. In fact, few, if any, English sources provide a satisfactory translation or even mention of *jizhu xiangchou* at all. The argument could be made, of course, that this is but a form of rhetoric that does not necessitate such intense scrutiny. However, and as I illustrate throughout this dissertation, a search for ‘*jizhu xiangchou*’ or simply ‘*xiangchou*’ in Mandarin Chinese generates endless results and in various mediums – from official news articles published directly by the state's various propaganda mouthpieces, to academic articles and research papers, to popular blog posts and entire WeChat accounts dedicated to a curation of resources related to

‘*xiangchou*,’ and to short viral videos on the social media app *Douyin* 抖, known in the West as TikTok. In other words, there is a deeper and broader resonance across all facets of Chinese society and culture towards *xiangchou* and its remembrance. In effect, *xiangchou* has much currency in various contemporary Chinese discourses and it is therefore a useful term to understand in the broader study of contemporary Chinese culture, society, and even politics. The challenge in this task, however, lies precisely in the ‘untranslatability’ of *xiangchou*.

### 1.3. What is Xiangchou?

In 2015, psychologist Tim Lomas was introduced to the Finnish word, *sisu*, translated and defined online in English by the Oxford Dictionaries as: “strength of will, courage, and resilience in the face of adversity, regarded as qualities and attributes of the Finnish people.” Although it may have been the actual meaning of “sisu” that moved him, it was ultimately the lack of English equivalent to adequately capture the term and its nuances that led him to launch the “Positive Lexicology Project,” an online database he defines as “an evolving index of ‘untranslatable’ words related to wellbeing from across the world’s languages” (Lomas, n.d.). Through crowdsourcing, Lomas’ lexicon has grown to over 1200 words across 140 different languages (Samuel, 2019). From Afrikaans to Zulu, they cover themes ranging from intimacy, to morality, and to humans’ relationships with nature. His project simultaneously illuminates the limitations that a single language – in this case, the English language – can impose upon our abilities to express or even understand subjective experiences and feelings, as well as the possibility of turning towards ‘untranslatable’ terms to enhance, better make sense of, and to even help cope with the very essence of ‘being’ on this earth. In other words, these words may be ‘untranslatable,’ but they are not unintelligible across cultural and linguistic barriers.

Included in Lomas' lexicon is the Portuguese concept *saudade*,<sup>5</sup> an 'untranslatable' that, without being pulled from its cultural roots, resonates in the English-speaking world for its ability to convey a sophisticated, yet very specific set of emotions embodied in the act of reminiscence. Although "nostalgia" can be used to help describe "saudade," there is an existing body of work across disciplines that attempt to untangle the complexity of the term's translation and interpretation. Filipe D. Santos (2017), for instance, describes *saudade* as a *meta-nostalgia*, a "nostalgia for nostalgia" (p. 102); whereas according to the extensive analysis of Zuzanna B. Silva (2012), *saudade* may be most often translated as "'longing,' 'yearning' or 'missing,' 'homesickness,' and 'nostalgia'" (p. 204). However, as Silva (2012) argues, the "main characteristic of *saudade* is its ambivalence," and it is a term that "expresses at once anxiety and happiness" (p. 205). Most importantly, and as Lomas' project emphasizes as well, the complexity of translation comes from the term's inherent "Portugueseness." In fact, and by no means an exhaustive list, existing literature even make the claim that *saudade* is central to the formation of both the Portuguese identity and a national "collective memory" (Feldman-Bianco, 1992), that it should be viewed "not only as the peculiar essence of the Portuguese soul, but also as the positive driving force behind some major Portuguese historical events" (Leal, 2000, p. 274). Indeed, it is a "Portuguese *ethos*" (Santos, 2017, p. 100), and, ultimately, it is even a *cultural key word* (Silva, 2012).

*Xiangchou* is similarly a sentiment for a complex and ambiguous longing, which I argue also carries a certain "Chineseness" that, like *saudade*, makes it a *cultural concept* far more nuanced for direct translation. To borrow from David Robertson (2017), who was writing to

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<sup>5</sup> *Saudade*, a noun, is defined in *The Oxford Essential Dictionary of Foreign Terms in English* as: "Longing, melancholy, nostalgia, as a supposed characteristic of the Portuguese or Brazilian temperament" (Speake & LaFlaur, 2002).

depict Lomas' initial fascination with *sisu*, *xiangchou* is “untranslatable” only “in the sense that there [is] no direct or easy equivalent encoded within the English vocabulary that could capture [its] deep resonance” (para. 5). Yet, in attempting to bridge the linguistic and cultural gap, the very concept of *xiangchou* itself needs (re)defining. Why does *xiangchou* resonate so deeply in contemporary Chinese culture and society, what does this resonance mean, and, indeed, what is *xiangchou*?

### 1.3.1. Xiangchou as a Nostalgic “Structure of Feeling”

“Does your *xiangchou* have a shape?” asks a netizen on *Zhihu* 知乎, the Chinese version of Quora. “My *xiangchou* is a triangular or rectangular-shaped *zongzi* 粽子 [a glutinous rice dumpling].” This is one of the 200 discussion boards on *Zhihu* inquiring about *xiangchou* from 2017-2020. While many posts sought specifically to analyze the meaning of a beloved contemporary poem by the title of “Xiangchou” (discussed below), many others asked about the meaning of “*xiangchou*” as a concept. These questions elicited a wide array of answers. In just the query above, *xiangchou* assumed many shapes; from silhouettes of grandparents, to mighty trees, to single clouds drifting further away from their piece of the sky.<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, *xiangchou* is a sentiment or a feeling underwritten by a soft, often bittersweet melancholia that arises from passive or active *reminiscence*. It is a formless vessel docked at the bay of memory in a sea of an ambiguous affect, given shape only by its passengers: objects of desire and elicitors of longing, concern, and even anguish – be it recollections of a mother’s embrace, the familiar comforts of an exile’s motherland, or a triangular *zongzi*.

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<sup>6</sup> This discussion board can be accessed at <https://www.zhihu.com/question/281680214>.

As alluded to above, one of the most recognized invocations of the concept is in the poem, “Xiangchou 乡愁,” penned by the late writer and poet, Yu Guangzhong 余光中. As one of the most important pieces of contemporary Chinese poetry, Yu’s “Xiangchou” has been translated and analyzed by many – and in many interpretations, the title and the repeated usage of the term is translated as “nostalgia,” whereas “homesickness” emerged as the most discussed theme of the poem. It was a nostalgic longing for the “home” that permeated Yu’s “Nostalgia,” with the nostalgic object – the amorphous idea of “home” – assuming a different form at each stage of the nostalgic subject’s life: from a tiny stamp, to a tomb, to an irreparable rift between two ideologies. It was a poem about Yu’s personal nostalgia and homesickness, but it also spoke of a generational yearning for a “China” once ‘whole.’ As a Nationalist, Yu fled the mainland in the wake of the CCP’s victory in 1949. Unable to return, he wrote “Xiangchou” from Taiwan in 1971 as an ode to his motherland and the friends, family, and memories he left across the strait. Written during such a sociopolitical milieu, “Xiangchou” symbolized a pervasive feeling of homesickness that resonated deeply with an entire generation of Chinese who may have been “separated only by a narrow strait” (Qin, 2017, para. 6), but whose distance – cultural, physical, and political – from the native “home” grew further apart by the day. For lack of better words, even if they could physically return to the mainland, there was a ‘nostalgia’ felt for an era that they could no longer return to.

In this sense, *xiangchou*, understood as ‘nostalgia’ and ‘homesickness,’ could be considered a “structure of feeling,” a term coined by Raymond Williams in 1954 and further elaborated upon in his later work, *Marxism and Literature* (1977). According to Williams (1977), a “structure of feeling” is “a cultural hypothesis” and an embodiment of “social experiences in solution” that is at “the very edge of semantic availability” (pp. 132-134). As

“structures” they are rigid and defined, yet, built by “feelings,” they are fluid and muted in their expression, harboured at the level of the individual, yet to be completely fleshed out in full articulation as ideologies, fixed social institutions, or worldviews. Ian Buchanan (2010) provides further clarity to the complex concept by describing its meaning and usage as a reference to the “different ways of thinking vying to emerge at any one time in history” (Buchanan, 2010, p. 455). According to Buchanan, Williams developed the term throughout his works as a way to problematize the Gramscian concept of hegemony (Williams 1961; 1977) and he explains how it is used to define a “gap between the official discourse of policy and regulations, the popular response to official discourse and its appropriation in literary and other cultural texts” (Buchanan, 2010, p. 455). As a social theory, the nostalgic structure of feeling can therefore be understood as subaltern or counterdiscourses that are reactions against certain deficiencies of the lived world, real or perceived, collectively felt (see Tannock, 1995 for further reading on ‘nostalgia’ as a structure of feeling and its critiques).

### 1.3.2. Xiangchou and its Multiple Dimensions

However, embedded within *xiangchou* is also a *spatio-cultural* dimension that needs to be addressed. Emphasizing the importance of the temporal (*shijianxing* 时间性) and spatial (*kongjianxing* 空间性) dimensions in *xiangchou*, Lu Shaoming (2016) cross-referenced thousands of documents on the topic across several Chinese-language databases between 1912-2014 and tallied the number of appearances of select terms to determine their relatedness to *xiangchou*. In his results, he highlights 2,639 appearances of *guxiang* 故乡 [hometown], 2,296 counts of *qinggan* 情感 [emotion; sentiment], and 2,249 uses of *jiyi* [memory; to remember]. Based on these findings, he argues the following:

Xiangchou, firstly, is a sentiment expressed towards the hometown (spatial dimension); secondly, it is a memory of as well as a hope for the hometown (temporal dimension). From the perspective of word formation, it can also be seen that ‘xiangchou’ is a compound term. Without the geospatial ‘xiang,’ then there would be no source for the sentiment of ‘chou.’ (p. 3)

If seeking to answer the question, “what is *xiangchou*,” Lu reminds us of the importance of looking to the composition of the term itself: *xiang* 乡, the hometown or countryside, and *chou* 愁, a sentiment of worry or concern. *Xiangchou* is therefore more aptly understood as harboring a combination of the temporal reminiscence embedded in nostalgia, the absence of and longing for ‘place’ embodied in ‘homesickness,’ and, critically, the *spatio-cultural* attachment to rurality and a form of topophilia for the literal countryside. Taken more literally, *xiangchou* is a sentiment of concern and/or an expression of worry for the hometown and/or the countryside. The work of Chen et al. (2020) echoes Lu’s emphasis on place when they write, “‘Xiang’ represents not only the hometown, but it also represents the countryside” (p. 1604), and that “the *xiangchou* within Chinese culture points towards a ‘collective home,’ it is based on a nostalgic emotion and a specific geospatial place” (p. 1603). Furthermore, their conception of the *xiang* highlights not only on its geospatial rooting in the physical countryside, but also the *culture* that it represents. As they argue, “embedded in *xiangchou* is traditional culture and rural culture, and, at the same time, it transmits the DNA of local cultures” (p. 1604). Referencing the frequent linkage between *xiangchou* and the Western understanding of “nostalgia,” Lu (2016) argues that the spatiality of *xiangchou* is frequently overlooked or forgotten. In fact, making a further claim for the cultural embeddedness of *xiangchou* in Chinese society, and, critically, *the embedding of Chinese culture into xiangchou*, he also explains how Confucian traditions helped establish and promulgate “this form of reminiscence and emotional attachment

to the *jiexiang* [hometown]” (p. 3). Therefore, the understanding of Chinese *xiangchou* emerges from “a social theoretical background that is different from Western schools of thought” (Lu, 2016, p. 3). In fact, providing a sizeable literature review of recent research produced in mainland China that discuss *xiangchou*, Chen et al. (2020) ultimately highlight,

the *xiangchou* of the Chinese people is underlined by a deep traditional cultural complex. Therefore, when citing keywords in English [for their publications], scholars within mainland China use the mandarin pinyin<sup>7</sup> ‘*xiangchou*.’ This further reveals how the study of *xiangchou* within Chinese culture is different from the academic discourses of Western societies. (p. 1603)

In other words, *xiangchou*, much like *saudade*, is an articulation of both the personal and the national. However, deeply rooted in the countryside, it speaks of idiosyncratic and intimate yearnings, as well as a nostalgic appreciation of rurality and indigeneity that is simultaneously individual and even civilizational – and it is precisely in this way that Xi Jinping’s invocation of *xiangchou* should be understood.

The recent body of literature and research produced on *xiangchou* is therefore indicative of a passionate claim for the terms’ “Chineseness.” What is interesting, however, is the fact that this literature, and, in fact, this interest upon *xiangchou*, emerged predominantly after 2014; Indeed, after Xi Jinping’s speech during the CUWC. This is, of course, no coincidence. Political discourse in the context of the CCP has a powerful ‘trickling-down’ effect, wherein the words of the incumbent president, the ‘paramount leader’ of the Party, the military, and the nation-state, can produce direct and lasting consequences, even if they appear to be ‘empty rhetoric.’ In fact, whilst Xi’s words may have certainly carried much ambiguity, what is worth acknowledging is not only the body of research that followed, but also how other government

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<sup>7</sup> Romanization of Mandarin characters.

officials, policymakers, different state organs, and even state and popular media outlets have similarly followed suit by interpreting *xiangchou* as being an explicit reference to China's rural roots and villages in the literal countryside. This specific notion of *xiangchou* has since been a central fixture in the state's mass media programs, with CCTV, the CCP's central mouthpiece, leading the way.<sup>8</sup> Most notably, *Jizhu Xiangchou* became the title of a high-production documentary series that featured hundreds of Chinese villages. The villages were not only portrayed as being 'nostalgic' and 'traditional' – therefore, reminiscent of the past – but, most importantly, the series was also a cautionary announcement for their protection and preservation, as well as a call-to-action for their revitalization.

As this dissertation will detail, *xiangchou* has been embedded into policies, projects, and campaigns that have literally mobilized people and capital back into the countryside. *Xiangchou*, in this sense, has become a call to action and a course of action; itself the ends and the means as a fully articulated top-down strategy for development. Returning to Williams' concept of a "structure of feeling" and its existence as a countercultural discourse – a culture *in solution* – I argue that *xiangchou* is no longer a "structure of feeling." Indeed, it has become a "fully precipitated" semantic and social formation as "Capital 'X' Xiangchou." Xiangchou is an integral component of the Party-state's new growth strategy to "revitalize" China's countryside.

#### 1.4. Chapter Outlines

This dissertation uses the term *xiangchou* to theorize a "turning point" in contemporary mainland China's development. Using the Extended Case Method, it takes the village of Heyang, situated in Xinjian Township, Jinyun County, Lishui City, Zhejiang Province as a case study to

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<sup>8</sup> I conducted a critical multimodal discourse analysis of *xiangchou* in a performance during CCTV's 2015 Spring Festival Gala in my article, "The Political Economy and Cultural Politics of Rural Nostalgia in Xi-Era China: The Case of Heyang Village," which was adapted from my MSc thesis, also completed at the University of Oxford from 2015-2016.

observe a renewed urgency from the top-down to prioritize rural development and, simultaneously, various bottom-up desires to either return to the literal or figurative home-village, or to ‘escape’ to the countryside in pursuit of the proverbial ‘good life.’ This dissertation is organized into chapters as follows. Chapter 2 introduces the reader to the field site, Heyang. It provides a historic overview of the village, and follows with a ‘guided tour’ of the village’s principal tourist site, the ancient heritage dwellings complex, *guminju* 古民居, a nationally recognized and protected heritage site. It introduces the development of Heyang’s tourism industry from its fledgling grassroots iteration in the mid-1990s to the mid-2010s, where a concerted effort was made by the county government to transform the *guminju* into a basin of *xiangchou*. This saw the Heyang *guminju* lifted to the status of a ‘national treasure’ in 2013, and later into a ‘4A’ grade tourism site in 2020. I open this chapter with a brief detour into the village’s history, stretching as far back as the Five Dynasties era (907-960AD), the period in which the village was supposedly ‘founded’ by Zhu Qingyuan, a high-ranking gentry who fled the imperial court to avoid being embroiled in war. Revered as the apical ancestor of the Heyang Zhu Clan, the discussion of Zhu then rejoins the 21<sup>st</sup> century, where these historic tales of ‘origins’ are told and sold as part of the ‘*xiangchou* Heyang’ tourism brand.

Chapter 3 is an extended discussion on research methodology. It explicates the Extended Case Method and its application for both the theoretical and empirical components of this project. It details the ways in which my research was carried out in Jinyun, my own subject-position as a researcher, the ethical considerations of this research, as well as the rationale behind why Heyang was ultimately chosen as a case study to observe *xiangchou*. What follows is a discussion of the unveiling of the Rural Revitalization Strategy by the Xi administration in 2017, as well as its local implementation in the county of Jinyun in the form of a plan known as

“Jinyun’s *Xiangchou* Industries to Enrich the People” in 2018. Within this plan, I illustrate how Heyang and its ‘*Xiangchou* tourism’ plays a critical role in the county’s ambitions to showcase its revitalization efforts.

Given that this dissertation homes in on migration ‘return flows’ into the countryside, Chapter 4 explores the embeddedness of migration and the immanence of *xiangchou* in Heyang. It illustrates how, since the reform and opening up era, Heyang’s economy has been largely built upon a culture of migration that has revolved around the industries of duck breeding and shrimp farming. By the 2010s, however, these industries that once sustained the village and its villagers’ livelihood were proving to be unsustainable because of local, national, and global processes of change. With the decline of traditional sources of livelihood, which have long necessitated cycles of out-migration and return, this chapter uses several case studies, including return migrants employed as tour guides in the tourist site, to demonstrate how households in Heyang reassessed their livelihood strategies and configurations, and how, by the 2010s, the ‘*Xiangchou* Tourism’ industry presented itself not only as an option to make a living, but to do so whilst living in the village. This chapter outlines the imperatives behind the need to bolster the tourism enterprise in the 2010s and it explores whether or not the ‘*Xiangchou* Tourism’ industry was, at the time of this writing, a viable source of employment and income for locals in Heyang.

Chapter 5 explores *xiangchou* as a materially and culturally embedded concept in the 2010s, which I argue represented an ‘era of crises’ in China. From the depletion of resources and pollution, to the dual processes of urban excess and rural destitution, this chapter demonstrates that the discourse of *xiangchou* emerged as, firstly, a symptom of crises, and later, a response and potential remedy to these crises, especially with the unveiling of the Rural

Revitalization Strategy in 2017. I begin this chapter with the global COVID-19 pandemic, during which the Xinjian Township government issued an emotional plea to its out-migrated households to return or remain at home in the countryside. An analysis of this letter illustrates how the government invoked *xiangchou* as a force for mobilizing the revitalization of the countryside. I then explore the case of a Mr. Tang, a returnee and entrepreneur who indeed heeded this call for return. He became the owner of a factory that falls within the state's project of producing '*xiangchou* industries' and that employed men and women from villages like Heyang. This chapter reveals how, during a national reckoning of the need to redistribute both human and financial capital, there was a renewed imperative to recall both unskilled and skilled migrants back to the countryside and to entice the development of new enterprises and the injection of capital into rural economies. Within both the 'return of industry' and the return of labor and capital, this chapter simultaneously probes how *xiangchou* played into new rural industries as marketable and consumable products and services, how rural residents were employed in these industries that produced *xiangchou*, and how *xiangchou* featured in the desires or needs of individuals to go (back) to small towns like Xinjian and their constituent villages like Heyang.

Chapter 6 examines another group of 'returnees:' young, white-collar entrepreneurs with various backgrounds of urban socialization. This chapter focuses on a new generation of youth who have relocated to Heyang after feeling disillusionment and 'burnout' in their respective jobs and lives in urban milieus. It argues that the return of youth to the countryside – in the forms of *fanxiangqingnian* 返乡青年 'self-rusticating youth' or, simply, youth seeking to be closer to their hometowns – is also a phenomenon that explains another facet to *xiangchou*: it is a powerful discourse that not only encourages return from the standpoint of individual choice

and desire, but also helps reshape the overall discourse surrounding the countryside as both a place and a ‘lifestyle’ considered as desirable to return to. In other words, *xiangchou* becomes a language of ‘escape’ as well as a materialized reality where one can seemingly ‘escape to.’ However, using the stories of four young entrepreneurs who have relocated their lives and enterprises to Heyang, I also illustrate the complexities of this ‘return’ in the forms of the limitations, challenges, and dilemmas that these youth have encountered in Heyang, as well as the ways in which their presence in the *guminju* have impacted the village and the lives of local villagers. This chapter also includes a comparative analysis of the burgeoning *fanxiangqingnian* phenomenon with the still-controversial *zhishiqingnian* 知识青年, ‘educated youth,’ phenomenon of the Mao-era. Such a revisit to this recent history ties what is considered as ‘Xi Jinping’s *xiangchou*’ with the national propagation of *xiangchou* and with the *xiangchou* produced, marketed, and consumed in Heyang.

This dissertation concludes with a final analysis of *xiangchou*, a discussion of the limitations of this project, and potential directions for future research. It revisits the tour guides discussed in chapter 4 and explores how they were instructed by representatives of the state to include the term *xiangchou* into their scripts. The repetition of *xiangchou* within the *guminju* illustrates the salience of the term, its cultural resonance, as well as its political influence. However, the tour guides’ personal interpretations of *xiangchou*, which differ from the *xiangchou* they speak of during their tours, also demonstrates the way in which the state’s appropriation of the term had at the same time alienated certain rural subjectivities from the sentiment. A clear divide emerged between the *xiangchou* that drew tourists to Heyang, the *xiangchou* that locals held for the Heyang of their childhood, and the ‘capital X Xiangchou’ that the state invoked to implement its policy objectives upon the village and its future.

Finally, taking inspiration from Kate Merkel-Hess' (2016), *The Rural Modern*, this dissertation ends with a meditation on the concepts of a 'rural modern' and a 'modern rural,' and I propose the notion of Xiangchou as a way through which the imagining of a 'rural modernity' can be possible. Ultimately, this proposal of and exploration into Xiangchou as a critical social and cultural *keyword* seeks to inform the broader discussions of what 'revitalization' could mean for the future of rural communities worldwide, whilst engaging with the mission of urban-rural reconciliation, as well as discussions on human desire and the ideals of a 'good life' in a post-industrial world. Indeed, although an "untranslatable" that is particular to its cultural context, *xiangchou* is ultimately universal in its underlying meaning, wisdoms, and sentiments. Beyond the mandarin speaking world, *xiangchou* is a multilayered emotion that is highly salient in the human experience. Understanding *xiangchou* proves valuable in helping to make sense of human desires and mechanisms of coping whilst living in an increasingly complex 'modern' world.

## Chapter 2. Describing the Site | A Walk through Heyang

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the reader to the central field site, Heyang village. I begin by describing the historical foundations of the village, focusing on the village's 'story of origins,' which continues to serve as a central narrative for Heyang's tourism, and which adds credence to the state's emphasis on Heyang's *xiangchou*. Accordingly, I move onto discussing the development of the tourism site, which centres on the oldest part of the village, the *guminju* 古民居, an impressive cluster of Ancient Heritage buildings and dwellings from the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1912) eras. I trace tourism development surrounding the *guminju* from its fledgling grassroots iteration in the 1990s, to the late 2010s to illustrate how tourism began as a bottom-up and participatory endeavor, but gradually became a fully top-down developmental strategy and priority. In fact, the County established a new public institution to specifically oversee and manage the preservation and the development of the *guminju* heritage site. Known as the "Jinyun County Heyang Ancient-heritage Protection and Development Management Commission" (henceforth, MC), I illustrate how the imposition of a new authoritative body upon Heyang's existing government structure marked a definitive adoption of '*xiangchou* tourism' as the village's main industry. Even more, the National State Council's recognition of Heyang as a 'National Treasure' (*guobao* 国宝) in 2013 led to a joint effort by the county, township, and village governments to attain for Heyang the status of a '4A'-grade tourism attraction in 2018;<sup>9</sup> This attainment would mean the ability to procure even more resources to further the local 'revitalization' effort. At stake was therefore not only

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<sup>9</sup> This is in reference to a national rating system awarded by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism – formerly the China National Tourism Association – that measures the quality of tourism sites on several criteria including cleanliness, accessibility, and range of activities. The highest possible score is '5A,' which includes sites such as the Forbidden City and parts of the Great Wall in Beijing.

Heyang's reputation and status in the eyes of the state, but also the future of the village and its villagers.

### 2.1. Heyang as an Administrative Village

Heyang village is situated in Xinjian Township, Jinyun County, Lishui City, Zhejiang Province. It is a 20-minute drive from the Jinyun county seat, which is a 2.5-hour train ride away from Shanghai's Hongqiao station, or 1.5-hours away from Hangzhou. In other words, Heyang is easily accessible from several major cities because of China's expansive high-speed train network. In fact, it is difficult to miss the numerous advertisements of Jinyun's rural tourism attractions that line select train terminals. Heyang's picturesque *guminju* features especially prominently in the promotional material, inviting travelers to step into history.

Heyang is a 'traditional Chinese village,' *chuantongcunluo* 传统村落. It is 'traditional' in many respects. For one, its existence spans not centuries, but a millennium, and its *guminju* consists of relatively well-preserved buildings and structures from dynastic history. It is 'traditional' also in the sense that it possesses both tangible and intangible cultural heritage relics, arts, and practices, some of which are under provincial and even national levels of protection. Despite its long history, it is 'traditional' also because it is these very relics, arts, and practices that continue to function within what is still a 'living village' with a registered population of over 3,300 people. Above all, it is 'traditional' because it was officially recognized by the state as such. Indeed, in 2012, Heyang was listed in the first batch of Chinese villages in need of preservation and protection by a project co-administered by several central level bureaus of the state (see Chapter 1, p. 14). Not to mention, in August 2020, Heyang and its prized cluster of heritage buildings was recognized by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism

as one of the country's key villages for rural tourism. By extension, it is an important pillar for rural revitalization in the entire region, which I further discuss in Chapter 3.

Heyang is also an administrative village. Administrative villages consist of two different organizational authorities, and in Heyang, they are jointly referred to as the *cunshuangwei* 村双委, Village Double Commission (henceforth VDC). The VDC is made up of the Village Party Committee (*cundangzhibu* 村党支部) and the Village Committee (*cunmingweiyuanhui* 村名委员会). The former is led by the Village Party Secretary (*shuji* 书记) who is a cadre and direct representative of the Party, whereas the latter is made up of officials elected by villagers and is helmed by the village head (*cunzhang* 村长). In terms of rank, the Party Secretary sits above the village leader. Yi Wu (2016), whose monograph explores rural land ownership rights from the perspective of various forms of official and unofficial organizations, details the relationship between the two governing bodies in the following manner:

Within an administrative village, political power is in the hands of the village party committee, with the party secretary as the most powerful figure and the village committee head as the second. There is in fact little differentiation between the work of the village party committee and that of the village committee. The party committee and the village committee are integrated into a single political entity. (p. 67)

Indeed, despite being two distinct entities with different functions, the tasks of the two different organizations can often blur and overlap. This can lead to confusion amongst villagers and a sense of disillusionment when it comes to the supposed 'power' that grassroots elections are supposed to give to villagers in terms of choice over village leader. In Heyang, the incumbent pair at the time of this writing referred to themselves as *haoxiongdi* 好兄弟, 'good brothers,' and they were seen by locals as 'two peas in a pod' – at best, a 'harmonious duo,' and at worst,

a pair of bandits. Even more, the establishment of the MC in 2011 introduced yet another layer of governance and opacity upon the village. Established as an official departmental level public institution (*zhengkejishiyedanwei* 正科级事业单位), the MC is staffed with its own director (*zhuren* 主任) and team of cadres, many of whom are not from Heyang. As a bureau of equal rank to the County, the MC sits above the VDC, meaning that its director has more power than the Party Secretary and the village head. As I detail below and further in the chapter 2, governance became an especially convoluted issue for villagers in Heyang, many of whom did not know the difference between the party secretary, the village head, or the director of the MC; let alone where to turn to air their various grievances.

‘Heyang’ also refers to a natural village, *zirancun* 自然村. A natural village differs from an administrative village in that it is a rural community formed “spontaneously out of settlement choices over long periods of history” (Wu Y. , 2016, p. 1). Since the post-Mao era, natural villages have been combined and reconfigured administratively into what is known as administrative villages, *xingzhengcun* 行政村. As a ‘natural village’ said to have existed for 1,100 years, ‘Heyang’ became an administrative village after absorbing Yanshanxia 岩山下, a neighboring natural village, into its political orbit in 2011 during a top-down amalgamation campaign. Heyang as an administrative village is about 59.4km<sup>2</sup> in size, within which 25.68km<sup>2</sup> is occupied by heritage-protected buildings that form the main tourist attraction of the *guminju*. The site of the *guminju* is referred to locally as the *laocun* 老村, ‘old village,’ and it is separated from what is known as the *xincun* 新村, ‘new village,’ by a stone bridge known as the *Gongjiqiao* 公记桥, itself a cultural heritage relic. The new village is the outgrowth Heyang, and it consists of ‘modern’ rural homes and a newly paved motorway that leads into the

township of Xinjian and further beyond. In this dissertation, usages of ‘Heyang’ refers to the administrative village, which includes Yanshanxia. For the purposes of the following section, however, I detail the historical formation of Heyang as a natural village.

## 2.2. A Walk through Heyang’s History

Although the exact formation of Heyang as a physical and socioeconomic entity is unclear, the most cited date marking its starting point is 932AD. Here, the story begins not with tales of the village’s earliest settlement, but with the arrivals of brothers Zhu Qingyuan 朱清源 and Zhu Qingyuen 朱清渊,<sup>10</sup> now revered as the apical ancestors of the Heyang Yiyang Zhu clan 义阳朱氏 (henceforth, Zhu clan). As is the case with many Chinese villages, clans have traditionally held a crucial role in village life and in mediating state-society relations. After the establishment of the PRC, however, lineage “associations were attacked and dissolved as they were seen as a threat to the CCP’s political power... and ancestor and religious worship [was] forbidden or severely restricted” (Svensson, 2016, p. 39). The governing role and administrative function of clans have since receded, with rural governance giving way to production brigades during the collective era, and now to village committees in the reform and post reform eras. Although the VDC is now the *de jure* governing bodies of the village, the historical legacy and cultural dominance that some family branches still retain an influencing role in village affairs. This includes, for instance, influencing the outcomes of village elections and the distribution of resources (see Pieke 2003). At the same time, the works of Tsai (2007), Y. Wu (2016), and Lu & Tao (2017), to name a few, illustrate how the functions of informal associations, solidarity

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<sup>10</sup> Zhu Qingyuen will be used to distinguish the younger from the older brother, as the Romanization of both names appear the same.

groups, and formal institutions can often overlap. Moreover, even if not administratively ‘functional,’ after the 1980s, lineage associations have, in many instances, increased in symbolic and cultural value. Marina Svensson (2016) explains:

once the economic reforms had started and the revolutionary rhetoric finished, many lineages began to reclaim and renovate their ancestral halls, update and compile genealogies and engage in different ancestors’ ceremonies and ritual festivals. Many lineages also set up small exhibitions about their history in the ancestral halls, including lineage codes and stories of famous ancestors. (p. 40)

Heyang is one such village where its historically dominant Zhu clan does not, in Frank Pieke’s (2003) terms, “seem to *do* a great deal” (p. 105). It does, however, possess great cultural capital. Heyang has fully embraced the reintroduction of lineage-based institutions back into its cultural heritage and has engaged in many of the above-mentioned practices, including the renovation and restoration of ancestral halls, lineage displays and exhibitions – both of which will be further discussed below – and the periodic updating of the Zhu clan’s genealogy book, *zupu* 族谱.

In the ‘official’ Heyang Culture Research Manual,<sup>11</sup> authors Zhou and Zhang (2011) explain how it is not every family clan that has had the fortune of lasting so long throughout Chinese history, and even fewer have their stories and successions so carefully detailed over the centuries (pp. 11-12). In other words, to have a relatively well-preserved set of ancient genealogies is precious, especially considering how many *zupu* fell victim to the iconoclasm of the Cultural Revolution. Cultural practitioners and other relevant figures in Heyang have managed to pass down and retain the Zhu clan’s *zupu*, and Zhou and Zhang (2011) have even been able to reference an edition that dates back to 1574. This is of importance because these

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<sup>11</sup> This research handbook was commissioned as part of the Ancient Heritage Village Research Series that is supported by the Zhejiang Province Federation of Humanities and Social Sciences Circles.

genealogy books tell not only the individual tales of notable Zhu ancestors, but they also carefully detail the events, the economic and commercial conditions, the demography, as well as the physical changes that have come to shape and define the village from the dynastic era, through to Republican China, the Mao years, and to the reform and current post-reform periods.

Pieke (2003) provides further insight into the significance of genealogies to a local community when he explains:

At the same time that a genealogy writes the detailed history of the unique achievements, spread, and proliferation of one particular group of agnates, it also incorporates this history into the grand narrative of the history of China without, however, wishing to explore this history in any detail. In other words, beyond a certain point of genealogical depth, the genealogical enterprise is only concerned with tracing the ultimate origins of a descent group, connecting a local history of proliferation and spread to a claim of ultimate origins. (p. 105)

Understood this way, genealogies are, on the one hand, a means to localize and insulate a small piece of history to a particular time and place; but on the other hand, they are also assertions by a certain group of *a* history, and with that, a certain claimed connection to a more globalized narrative beyond the clan. Importantly, genealogies also define belonging to a place, territorializing these claims for belonging and, simultaneously, canonize the identities that are borne through these places and give identity to these places and to whom they belong. A genealogy is therefore “a document that constructs a selective memory” (Pieke, 2003, p. 104), and indeed, when a selected memory becomes the dominant, uncontested discourse, said memory itself becomes not just ‘a history,’ but The History. In the case of Heyang, it is this tale of the Zhu settlement and the clan’s handed down heritage that serves as the basic foundation of the village’s history; at least, as far as the tourism enterprise is concerned.

The chronicles of the Zhu clan are critical to the Heyang story that is packaged and sold as part of its tourism. This is true not only in the sense that the act of maintaining *zupu* provides a glimpse into processes of identity building and social ordering; but it is also true in that the very act of continuing the Zhu *zupu* has become a source of contention and a reason for protest by disgruntled villagers, who now find themselves entangled in the tourism enterprise. Therefore, understanding Heyang as well as the nature and claimed ‘value’ beneath its tourism industry benefits from a brief sojourn into the Zhu story and its claims of origin and connection to Chinese national history.

### 2.2.1. Heyang: A Story of Origins

The fall of the mighty Tang Dynasty in 907AD gave way to one of the most politically divisive and chaotic periods in imperial Chinese history, the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms (907-960AD).<sup>12</sup> With the political vacuum left behind in the Tang rubble, multiple powers splintered and saw to the formation of new independent states and kingdoms, one of the first being Wuyue 吴越. Under the rule of King Qian Liu, Wuyue quickly became one of the most powerful coastal kingdoms, with the culturally influential and technologically advanced Hangzhou – then referred to as Xifu – as its capital. Zhu Qingyuan was a member of the central secretariat of King Qian Liu. As carefully detailed by the late Jin Zhaofa (2005), a local historian and lifelong *Heyangren* 河阳人, person of Heyang, Qingyuan did not hold a particularly high rank in King Qian Liu’s court, however, he was close enough to the locus of power to be “incredibly sensitive to any changing winds in authority” (p. 3). And indeed, sensing a storm

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<sup>12</sup> Although it is commonly acknowledged that the end of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms era ended in 960, which marks the beginning of the Song Dynasty, the last independent kingdom was not conquered by the Northern Song until 979.

that would inevitably reach Wuyue, Qingyuan made the decision to leave the capital with his younger brother, Qingyuen. Yet, the militarily adept younger Zhu sibling was reluctant to leave, wanting instead to stand valiantly by his emperor's side and hold onto the coastal kingdom's sovereignty. According to Jin (2005), the two brothers quarreled over this decision, but it was ultimately with the logic of *taoguangyanghui* 韬光养晦 – the idiom of “maintaining a low profile” now famously attributed to Deng Xiaoping's Chinese foreign policy during the reform era – which the elder Zhu managed to use to convince the younger to leave. Together with their families, the Zhu's fled from Hangzhou. With the intention of eventually returning, their journey was underwritten by the mantra of “bide time, maintain a low profile; await for peace in the kingdom:” *taoguangyanghui, yidaitianxiaqing* “韬光养晦，以待天下清” (Jin, 2005, pp. 3-7; see also Zhou & Zhang, 2011).

After a few years of wandering, the Zhu's eventually found themselves in the remote county of Jinyun. While it was its unassuming nature that drew the two brothers to the county, they were ultimately rooted by the beauty and strategic positioning of a small, nameless settlement spot. Based on Jin's (2005) description, this nameless location sat a healthy distance away from the political orbit of the county-seat, while being just a stone's throw away from the bustling township of Xinjian; it was a place that had its back nestled against strong mountains and faced a stretch of seemingly endless paths and intertwining roads, all of which would eventually lead to the likes of Chuzhou (now present-day Lishui City), Wenzhou, and, of course, back to the imperial nucleus of Hangzhou (pp. 14-16). In other words, it provided the perfect vantage point to bide time, maintain a low profile, and wait for peace in the kingdom. Eventually, the two brothers bestowed this settlement with the name “Heyang 河阳.” This was a nostalgic nod to their original hometown of Xinyang in Henan Province 河南信阳, which, located in the

central China plains, became a distant home that they could long for but no longer return to. Indeed, this was their *xiangchou*.

In their interpretation of pioneering Chinese sociologist Fei Xiaotong's writings, Zhou and Zhang (2011) argue that for the two Zhu brothers, the naming of Heyang was "not only a spatial negation of the distance that stood between themselves and their hometown," but it was also their way of continuing the bloodline of the Henan Xinyang Zhu clan (p. 26). Whether intended or not, the Zhu brothers found themselves rooted firmly to the new land now known as Heyang Village. Never did they return to their homeland, and, in fact, never did they receive the opportunity to return to King Qian Liu's side in the Wuyue Court. Indeed, the military upheavals and political uncertainty that came with the Five Dynasties era out-bode their time, and it would not be until 978AD, nearly half a century after their arrival to Heyang, when the fate of their kingdom and the political vacuum was sealed.

Wuyue was the longest lasting independent southern kingdom of the Five Dynasties period before it too, under the last king, Qian Shu, had to face the music that was the expansion of the Northern Song dynasty. Under its founder and first ruler, Zhao Kuangyin, also known as King Taizu (r. 960-976), the Northern Song Dynasty set off to re-conquer the kingdoms that had splintered in the aftermath of the Tang Dynasty's fall. The Qian family held on valiantly for the first eighteen years of Northern Song's gradual dominance, however, in 976, Qian Shu finally pledged allegiance to the northern kingdom in a bid to save his people and territory from the destruction that would result should they have gone to war. The Middle Kingdom was therefore reunified under the rule of the Zhao family, marking the beginning of one of the most culturally and intellectually flourishing dynasties in imperial Chinese history, the Song Dynasty (960-1279). Wanting to avoid another division of the kingdom, one of the first changes the new

Song rulers enacted was to decrease the number of military strongmen of aristocratic backgrounds in the bureaucracy. A renewed interest was placed on the civil service exam, established in the Sui Dynasty (581-618), with the aim of bringing in ‘fresh blood’ into the bureaucracy through a more meritocratic system. Over time, “a momentous political shift [took place] during the early Song,” and imperial China transitioned from “a society ruled by a hereditary aristocratic order to a society governed by a central bureaucracy of scholar-officials chosen through the civil-service examination” (Department of Asian Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2001).

Throughout the Song period, the civil service exam “came to be considered the normal ladder to success” (Asia for Educators, Columbia University, n.d.). In the Song and Yuan (1279-1368) dynasties, Heyang produced a total of eight *jinsi* 進士, scholar-officials holding the highest attainable degree in the imperial civil service examination system. Now collectively referred to as the *bashi* 八士, the ‘eight scholars,’ the honourable eight were all descendants of the Heyang Zhu clan. To mark the importance of their achievement, an archway with the engraving *bashimen* 八士門, ‘Eight Scholar Gate’ (Figure 2), was erected in honour of the distinguished scholars during the Yuan dynasty. The original archway was burned down during a military rebellion. However, it was so central to the village’s identity that a replica was rebuilt. This replica has since stood as the main entryway into the village throughout the centuries. Although our Zhu protagonists were unable to take the exam to return to the courts, it was not long after their arrival to Heyang that they successfully established themselves as the local ‘aristocracy.’ Moreover, the pride and glory attached to the eight *jinsi* further bolstered the cultural and political power behind the clan, giving those with a claimed ancestral connection

to the Zhu name a rise in aristocratic status throughout history as the village itself expanded over the years.



Figure 2: Eight Scholar Gate flanked by the 'Xihan'  
Photo by Author

### 2.2.2. Heyang: A Story of Rarity

Throughout my fieldwork, an expression that I frequently came across was: “One who does not cross through the Eight Scholar Gate, does not count as a true person of Heyang,” *burubashimen, busuanheyangren* 不入八士門，不算河陽人. Visitors today, however, do not enter Heyang through the Eight Scholar Gate. Over the centuries, the village has grown beyond this archway, and its expansion increased especially rapidly during the reform and post reform eras. Instead, visitors enter through another site that is flanked by a newly renovated parking lot

to one side, and a visitors' greeting and information centre that came into operation in late 2019 on the other.

The Eight Scholar Gate is now a 'must-see' attraction on the tourist path. Led by Heyang's devoted tour guides, tourists are customarily told to stop and huddle beneath the archway. As part of my fieldwork, I have joined several tour groups as both a visitor and researcher. I have become familiar with the tour guides' routines. Whilst instructed to pause under the Eight Scholar Gate, visitors are made aware of the two stone statues that sit on either side of the archway. The tour guides, as dictated by their scripts, will then proceed to quiz the tourists, asking them what they think the stone statues are meant to resemble. Although worn down by the passing of time and made smooth by the many hands that have rubbed curiously over their heads, the crouched postures of the statues reveal beastly figures that are akin to the stone lions that are ubiquitously stationed outside doors and entryways across the country. However, "these are not lions," the tour guide would say with a sly, albeit, well-rehearsed grin, anticipating the error of the uninitiated. "These are called *xihan* 稀罕," they would go on to explain, watching the confusion on tourists' faces with bemusement. Indeed, not fully a lion, the statues are considered a pair of *sibuxiang* 四不像 – a hybrid creature. This specific hybrid creature has the body of the lion and what appears to be the mouth of a toad and the legs of a frog. Having now captured visitors' curiosities, the tour guide is right on cue to delve into the origin of these statues.

I have listened closely to the different tour guides' explanations of the statues, and despite their stylistic differences in narration, the story told of the *xihan* is always consistent with what is written in historical records and books such as Jin's. As the story goes, the pair of *xihan* were gifted to the village by the first ruler of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), Zhu

Yuanzhuang, also known as Emperor Hongwu (r. 1368-1398). The emperor was supposedly made aware of Heyang village by Zhu Weijia 朱维嘉, a member of the Imperial Academy, and a man who happened to hail from Heyang himself. According to Zhu Yunlin,<sup>13</sup> a native of Heyang and now the village's most seasoned and "award-winning" tour guide, Weijia was a distinguished scholar who was frequently in contact with the Emperor. During one of their conversations, the emperor asked Weijia if his hometown had produced any notable figures. The conversation led naturally upon the eight *jinshi*, which immediately prompted the Emperor into a burst of applause while proclaiming "*xihan*, *xihan* 稀罕, 稀罕!" The term *xihan* is used to describe something that is rare and uncommon. Emperor Hongwu's exclamation of *xihan* is therefore interpreted as an emphatic reaction to the rarity of having eight *jinshi* scholars emerge from a single small village. This is confirmed in Jin's (2005) records, who wrote that the Emperor immediately ordered for a 'pair of *xihan*' to be made and sent to Weijia's home-village.

At this point of her spiel, Yunlin becomes even more animated, and returns another question to her tour group: "well, how on earth does one make and gift 'rareness?'" This was certainly a challenge for Weijia, who, according to Yunlin, found himself stuck between a rock and a hard place. "If he did not have anything made, he would be defying the Emperor's word – an unthinkable offence. But to follow the Emperor's directives meant that he would have to create something out of nothing!" (Fieldwork, August 13, 2018, Heyang Village). The story goes on to describe how Weijia agonized over the *xihan* for days, simply unable to imagine how to bring *xihan* into existence; to essentially materialize the adjective of "rare." Yunlin continues emphatically, this time conjuring her acting skills through a re-enactment of a scene imagined to have taken place six hundred years ago:

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<sup>13</sup> Names have been changed to respect the informants' privacy.

Seeing his superior in a complete state of distress, a junior scholar suggested to Weijia to make do with two stone lions. ‘All aristocratic families have a pair of mighty lions guarding their doors, should that not suffice as a gift?’ The junior asked earnestly. ‘But there is nothing rare about a pair of lions!’ Weijia groaned. ‘Well, just remove their heads, that will certainly be a first, would it not?’ The quick-witted junior retorted. Just like that, this is how the *xihan* came to be. Stone lions are certainly not rare, but no one would dare say that a pair of *headless* lions is not *xihan*, because to be truly *xihan* means to be something that one has never seen before. (Fieldwork, August 13, 2018, Heyang Village)

Yunlin now brings her audience into China’s modern history, stopping at a scene where the *xihan*, because of their supposed connection to an emperor, were nearly thrown into the river by Red Guards as part of the “Campaign to Destroy the ‘Four Olds’” during the Cultural Revolution. It is believed that a heroic elder risked his life to save the statues and hid them discreetly in his courtyard. After the chaos of the Cultural Revolution settled, the ‘unimaginable’ happened. Six university students were produced from this very courtyard, an extremely rare phenomenon in the village, given the lack of opportunities for higher education in the countryside. Locals believed that it was the statues that brought this courtyard such good fortune, and the pair of headless beasts were eventually returned to their original stand outside of the Eight Scholar Gate. Having reached this point of her tale, Yunlin is now ready to wrap up this segment of her tour. Before herding the group through the Eight Scholar Gate – a symbolic rite of passage to ‘become *heyangren*’ – she instructs her group to rub the heads of the *xihan* for good fortune. “This is the true pride of Heyang village, the spiritual pillar of *heyangren*” (Fieldwork, August 13, 2018, Heyang Village).

### **2.2.3. Heyang: A Story Out of Nothing**

Coupled with Yunlin’s zealous personality and passionate love for her home-village, it is not unfathomable for tourists to walk away from this tour thinking that this is indeed a

remarkable story. However, the pair of *xihan* are themselves objectively rather unremarkable, easily overlooked, even. Had it not been for the insistence of tour guides to cast my gaze downwards, I might have missed them completely. Nevertheless, the dominant discourse behind the *xihan* is full of pride. According to a description provided in the Heyang Culture Research Manual, Zhou and Zhang (2011) write that despite being poorly crafted and made from relatively inexpensive materials, the pair possess a “rugged beauty;” in fact it is their very un-noteworthy nature that make them truly “one of a kind,” truly *xihan* (p. 126).

Not every Heyang local would agree, however. Instead of pride or a sense of greater ‘connection’ to something beyond themselves and their current era, for many, ‘indifference’ and even ‘disenchantment’ might be the more appropriate terms to associate with the *xihan*. For instance, during one of the focus groups I conducted within the *guminju* (see chapter 3, pp. 82-109 for a full research methodology), passions quickly escalated when the subject of tourism came up. Zhu Zhangwei, a 71-year-old farmer who still resides within the *guminju*, was particularly vocal about the pair of *xihan*. He engaged in the following exchange with his fifty-year-old neighbour, Zhu Qingru:

Zhangwei: The first time they wanted to do tourism, we had a big meeting in the town hall. I was the only person to oppose. That time he [the former County Party Secretary] came to Heyang. He was here to speak. That time he came to Heyang, he also took several thousand *kuai* [Chinese Yuan] from us. What he wanted to say was that Heyang is worth visiting as a tourist. But I called him out on this. I said, “you are relying on deception, aren’t you?” (*nongxuzuoja* 弄虚作假). So, I challenged him. I asked him, “for instance, where did the two *xihan* actually come from?” I questioned him on this, let me tell you. But he of course did not give me an answer. He just said: “Zhu Geliang<sup>14</sup> did not actually ever live in Zhuge village (诸葛村) yet they still claim some kind of connection to him there, why must you be so [fussy]?” I know he wanted to claim that the two *xihan* were given to Heyang by Zhu Yuanzhuang [Emperor Hongwu], but do

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<sup>14</sup> Zhu Geliang is a famous strategist and the Imperial Chancellor of Shu Han during the Three Kingdoms period (220-280).

you truly believe that Zhu Yuanzhuang did this? The two statues were absolutely not conferred to us by the Emperor.

Qingru: This is why tourism, at its core, is an affair born out of nothing, *wuzhongshengyoudeshi* 无中生有的事.

Zhangwei: Yes, absolutely, creating something out of nothing! That is tourism! I'll be frank, let me tell you about the *xihan* ... (Group Interview, February 13, 2019, Heyang Village)

Zhangwei continued with a fairly convoluted story about the *xihan*, which involved a mysterious “Mr. Fan,” a minor spat between locals, and a threat from Mr. Fan to tear down all the houses behind the Eight Scholar Gate. Suffice it to say, Zhangwei’s version of the story involving a petty quarrel certainly strikes a very different tone from the ‘official narrative’ – that is, the officially documented and propagated narrative – of imperial recognition. Moreover, his challenge to the former county Party Secretary also reveals that there is certainly cause for doubt when it comes to claims of ‘authenticity’ in such tales.

To be sure, the works of Jin (2005) and Zhou & Zhang (2011) acknowledge how there is a degree of fiction in the story, with the former writing that “there is not enough evidence to support these historical claims” (p. 39) and the latter pair similarly admitting that “this tale is rather unimaginable, *bukesiyi* 不可思议” (p. 136). Yet, all are also equally quick to cast this aside to instead emphasize the sociocultural significance of this story, claiming that it brings joy to Heyang’s villagers and that the statues have continued to bring good fortune to the village for six hundred years. Although residents within the *guminju* are not the target audience for such stories, the way in which cultural elites and related voices of authority continue to relay the relevance of the *xihan* and other similar relics back to such notions as the ‘prosperity,’ ‘fortune,’ ‘joy,’ and ‘pride’ of the village directly implicates residents into this narrative. Real or not, this pair of *xihan* materially embodies an imperial blessing on Heyang; they are a vivid

linkage between Heyang village and the imperial state, the Emperor of the Song Dynasty himself, even.

In some ways, this is an assertion of a specific history upon the living village and the villagers' lives, especially as those residing within the *guminju* are directly in the crosshairs of all the comings and goings involved with tourism. Living within or even around the *guminju* now means sharing a space with the shuffling feet and clicking cameras of tour groups. It means being part of the performance that local officials put on for visiting cadres from neighbouring villages sent to Heyang for 'study tours,' as well as the higher-ranking officials who come periodically to check up on Heyang's 'progress,' and whose presence summons almost every Heyang cadre from their otherwise stationary desk jobs. It also means becoming part of the staged spectacle of 'tradition' and 'authenticity' that the occasional camera crew, sent over from various state media outlets, seek to capture. Indeed, that spectacle is, in fact, the staging of a local and national *xiangchou*, which involves the narratives of Heyang's historic connections to emperors, scholarly heroes, lineage reverence, and, above all, a local pride and identity created through these historic origins and materialized through these stone relics. As evidenced by Zhangwei's frustrations, however, these are not necessarily narratives that all residents embrace. In fact, this is not their *xiangchou*.

The exaggeration or full-on invention of myths and legends exists in all forms of 'heritage,' and tourism certainly exploits this. The constant retelling and reproduction of stories like that of the *xihan* certainly serve to 'sell' Heyang history and culture to visitors in a neatly packaged and consumable form. At the same time, it is also a case made for the historical continuity of the Zhu clan's 'heritage,' and, revisiting Pieke (2003), of their "claim of ultimate origins" (p. 105). The tales of the Zhu clan and the *xihan* are pervasive. They are printed in

black and white in ‘authoritative’ histories; they are chronicled in contemporary versions of the *zupu* as ancestral memories and heritage; they are told and retold through the mouths of tour guides to visitors; they are displayed in no less than three languages on information boards that are posted on residents’ homes along the tourism trail; and they are neatly folded into the local state’s plans and proposals meant to procure funds from higher-ups for ‘development.’ The reinforcing of these stories creates and maintains a claimed connection between the humble village of Heyang to the loci of imperial Chinese power, the constant reproduction of this story is thereby a means to ‘make relevant’ Heyang’s history “to the grand narrative of the history of China” (Pieke, 2003, p. 105). This is the selling point of Heyang’s tourism; the long history and heritage enclosed within the well-preserved ancient-heritage dwellings complex harkens back to China’s ancient and imperial ‘traditions.’

Yet, individual and group interviews conducted within the *guminju* reveals the thorns that lie beneath not only the rosy tales of heritage and history, but also beneath the act of ‘doing tourism,’ *gaolvyou* 搞旅游. Zhangwei’s brief but scathing remarks about the county official’s pocketing of money, for instance, is highly indicative of suspicion that villagers harbour towards cadres. Meanwhile, both Zhangwei and Qingru’s usage of the idiom of *wuzhongshengyou*, “something born out of nothing,” suggests their skepticism towards the tourism endeavour altogether. To be sure, whether or not the county official described in Zhangwei’s anecdote actually pocketed the money is questionable, and from where Zhangwei even received his information also raises some doubt. In fact, it is entirely unclear which meeting Zhangwei is referring to and when it actually took place. For more context, Zhangwei is the team captain of

his production brigade,<sup>15</sup> and as captain, one of his roles is to attend meetings held by the local state and represent his brigade members. Having been a captain for over thirty years, it is likely that he has gotten certain things in his timeline conflated. Yet perhaps it is precisely this irate confusion that further emphasizes the frustrations and the tensions that exist and, indeed, persist in Heyang's *guminju*.

### 2.3. The Development of Tourism in Heyang

As mentioned earlier, the invocation of 'Heyang' commonly refers to the administrative village. In addition to *yanshanxia* village, the administrative village encompasses the 'new village area,' the *xincun* 新村, which was an outgrowth of the original village due to the restrictions placed upon the expansion of the old village, the *laocun* 老村. The new village consists of modern rural housing built by villagers that are multiple stories tall and made of modern construction materials. Many are only partially constructed or partially furnished as a way to cut costs. For many, a larger home is more impressive, but only a portion of it will be lived in or seen by visitors. Residents in the new village are those who relocated from the old village. Although many purchased plots of homestead land in the new village areas themselves, many others were allocated the land by the state to build new housing after being told by the state to leave their old dwellings. Moreover, because the old village is now considered a heritage-protected site, the construction of new buildings is strictly prohibited within the designated protected area by the state. Not to mention, renovations done to the traditional buildings must also go through state approval. It was only during a brief window between the

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<sup>15</sup> Even though the production brigade no longer carries the same organization of agricultural production functions as it did during the commune era, it still serves as the most basic organizational unit of the village. The entire natural village of Heyang is divided into 16 production brigades.

1980s and early 1990s when a few ‘modern buildings’ were constructed within the range of the old village. This was during the immediate reform era when some enterprising villagers managed to make a small fortune and were able to replace their traditional dwellings for a modern, more comfortable home (see chapter 4, pp. 131-133). By the late 1990s, however, locals saw value in their heritage homes and the potential profitability of tourism. The industry therefore began as a grassroots and participatory affair, with the support and passion of locals. As the following section illustrates, however, passion and participation waned quickly as villagers failed to see immediate returns from their involvement. Ironically, villagers saw less value in tourism as the village became more valuable in the eyes of the state.

### **2.3.1. An Enthusiastic Start to Tourism**

The earliest signs of tourism in Heyang began in the late 1990s. As I have been told by several informants, including Zhu Yilong – a shrewd local and retired elementary school teacher, endearingly referred to by most as Teacher Zhu – locals began hearing rumours that villages in the neighbouring Prefecture of Lan Xi were converting their ancient dwellings into tourist sites in 1996 (Fieldwork, July 2018, Heyang). The rumours were true and the village leadership of Heyang went to Lan Xi on ‘official study’ (*kaocha* 考察) to learn from their neighbouring cadres. Upon their return, they inspired and mobilized the villagers of Heyang to do the same, with the first order of business being the creation of an exhibition for the Zhu lineage in one of the ancestral halls within the *guminju*. What resulted, however, was more akin to a local shrine of worship for the Zhu clan, than it was an exhibition intended for visitors. It did not generate any income, as villagers had naively anticipated. However, it was an affair that, similar to Marina Svensson’s (2016) research on lineage in other parts of Zhejiang, helped “create a sense of identity and community” (p. 40). In fact, the community-led restoration of lineages was

common practice in villages across the country in the immediate reform era (Svensson, 2016), and this was particularly important for the maintenance of community morale in a context where collectives were dismantled and where much of the country's rurality was beginning to experience outward migration.

At the time of this writing, the Zhu clan was in its 43<sup>rd</sup> generation, and it was still the most prominent in Heyang, if only in terms of representation. Official statistics claim that 94% of households still share the same Zhu surname. This familial or ancestral association helped foster much community involvement and enthusiasm during this earlier phase of tourism development. However, tourism was still a very grassroots and fledgling enterprise that happened quietly on the sidelines of every day, village life. "We were so naïve back then," recalls Teacher Zhu with a chuckle, "we thought that given the beauty and the long history behind our heritage homes, tourism would make us rich; that we would certainly do better than the villages over in Lan Xi!" (Interview, July 27, 2018, Heyang Village). Indeed, income from tourism was truly minimal. Nevertheless, the bottom-up enthusiasm did not subside, not even after the local state, in the form of the village dual committees, became involved in tourism in a more official capacity.

### **2.3.2. The 'Official' Start of Tourism**

On the 1<sup>st</sup> of October 2000, a ribbon cutting ceremony was held with much fanfare to announce the 'official' opening of Heyang's tourism. Before proud village officials, the press, and on looking villagers, a new bamboo plaque was installed to bestow the status of *lyoujingqu* 旅游景区, 'tourist site,' upon Heyang. 'Star tour guide' Zhu Yunlin – who, by 2020, would have worked on and off with the Heyang tourism enterprise for two decades – recounts the event in the following manner:

I was here when they just started with development. It was October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2000, they [the VDC] were just cutting the ribbon. We were also featured on Lishui TV channel. We were all very excited. We gathered in one person's home to watch the affair, because we were featured in the news, you know. It was all so exciting for us... The event was to witness the unveiling of our new tourist site plaque. Back then, the plaque was made out of bamboo. This marked the establishment of the tourist site [and] it was the [VDC] that were in charge of its management back then. (Group Interview, February 23, 2019, Heyang Village)

As Yunlin describes, this event generated much excitement in the village and brought a sense of pride to the community, particularly with the media attention received. Moreover, with the involvement of the VDC, attention and resources were devoted to tourism development. Overtime, a field was cleared and paved with gravel to serve as a simple parking lot, a ticket booth was installed, more tour guides were trained and hired, and a casual family-run restaurant was opened outside the main entrance. At the same time, the VDC's involvement and the bestowment of the title of 'official' tourist site was also an indication of local officials' changing priorities and plans in terms of the village's development. Of course, in China, changes at the local level do not take place in a vacuum – they ultimately reflect and respond to the changes in policy directives at the top.

The year 2000 was significant; that was the year the *guminju* was recognized by the Zhejiang government as a Provincial-level Protected Historic Cultural Area, *shengjilishiwenuhuabaohuqu* 省级历史文化保护区 (See p. 8 for a list of key dates in Heyang's development). Taking a further step back, this took place during a national climate where there was a 'mad dash' for World Heritage Designations as well as the witnessing of the rise of a domestic 'heritage boom' (Shen & Chen, 2010; Silverman & Blumenfield, 2013). As Marina Svensson and Christina Maags (2018) explain, the act of heritagization cannot be understood without considerations of ideological shifts and socio-economic developments (p. 13). In other

words, ebbs and flows in the Chinese political and ideological climate have and continue to shape, create, and even cause ruptures in the state's constant re-evaluation of 'heritage' – both tangible and intangible – as a concept. The highly strategic omission and inclusion of sites, practices, and artefacts into this ultimately fluid and amorphous category of 'heritage' both informs and is informed by such changes. Therefore, Deng's great ideological leap away from Mao's ideological fervour, as well as Deng's pivot towards a path of reform, precipitated an especially drastic re-evaluation of cultural heritage and their significance to the construction of a 'Modern China.' Moreover, this re-evaluation of heritage took place within a China that was just beginning to cautiously reopen its doors to the rest of the world and its market to the forces of globalization. Not to mention, these processes took place under a Communist Party attempting to rebrand and reposition itself as guardian of Chinese traditional culture. In this light, the 'mad dash' for World Heritage Designations indicated, among many things, the Chinese state's desire for global recognition, while the 'heritage boom' that happened at the domestic level, suggests an ongoing reassessment and reclamation of local and regional histories and identities based on both present conditions and future goals.

From an economic standpoint, tourism is a natural companion to heritage, whether it is using UNESCO-recognized sites as an extra pull for inbound visitors or using cultural tourism as a means for lesser developed areas to boost their economies.<sup>16</sup> Such forms of tourism have been especially inseparable from discourses of rural development (see for instance, Oakes, 1995; Chio, 2014; and K. Wu, 2015). Consistent with this view, Svensson (2016) notes how recent years have seen an expansion in the "concept of heritage to include vernacular buildings in the countryside, for example ancestral halls and whole villages" (p. 35). For Heyang, the

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<sup>16</sup> See Joseph Nicolai (2017), who provides a discussion of Heyang and its 'heritage value' in relation to UNESCO's "world heritage value" from a critical communications standpoint.

designation of “official tourist site” in 2000 not only changed its status, but it also pegged the village’s future to tourism, altering the trajectory of the village’s development. As a consequence, it also halted the physical development of the village; that is, if ‘development’ in this context is to be understood as ‘modernization,’ and if ‘modernization’ is to be understood in relation to ‘urbanity,’ then Heyang, or at least the *guminju*, was to be situated in a time and place of the pre-modern past.

#### **2.4. Heyang’s Arrested Development?**

Throughout the 1980s, several households began tearing down or vacating their old dwellings to construct modern, multi-storey concrete homes. These new homes were either built directly on the land where the old dwelling stood or were constructed on empty lots of land purchased from the village council on the outskirts of the old village. This act of tearing down the old for the replacement of new dwellings was common practice in villages across the country, as households that were able to capitalize during the economic reforms were now able to construct modern homes equipped with more comfortable living conditions and amenities that lacked in traditional rural homes. In Heyang’s case, the poor insulation of the wooden frames of the ancient dwellings as well as their decaying wooden beams and scaffolding were just some of the many reasons for the desired ‘upgrade.’ Moreover, being able to construct a new home was also a demonstration of one’s relative wealth as well as an announcement – whether intentional or not – of one’s status in the village. As I discuss in more detail in chapter 4, the display of a ‘modern home’ reinforced village social hierarchy in the post-reform era.

### 2.4.1. ‘Perverse Winds’

After being recognized as a place carrying historic and cultural value, however, the rights to use and live in the *guminju* were in some sense reclaimed by the local state. Put differently, the local state had a renewed stake in the future of the *guminju*. This manifested most notably in regulations that forbade anymore destruction and construction within areas considered as ‘cultural heritage.’ On the one hand, however, this newfound interest in the *guminju*’s intrinsic cultural and historical value met a precious need to preserve Heyang’s ancient courtyard-style living quarters. This has helped maintain the overall integrity of the village’s ancient layout as a whole. Yet on the other hand, it also solidified the fates of the locals who were still living within the *guminju*. Residents who had not moved out or those who had not yet converted their old homes by the mid-1990s were by and large the most economically vulnerable of the village. During the Mao-era, land reform policies immediately after the establishment of the PRC enabled some of the poorest households to live in the village’s ancestral halls and temples. Therefore, the officials in charge of overseeing local development found themselves faced with the difficult and contentious task of resettling the very same households out of these ancestral halls and temples, now reclaimed as public and commercial spaces for tourism. The ‘heritagization’ of the village made the relocation of villagers an ever more critical task; yet the ossification of the *guminju*’s physical structure would render leaving the old village ever more challenging for many within its boundaries. As such, the forced relocation of villagers and the redistribution of village land would become one of the main sources of tension across the entire administrative village.

Zhu Yueheng’s household is an example of a relocated household, *banqianhu* 搬迁户. In 2012, she was offered a plot of homestead land in the new village in exchange for her household’s compliance to move out of the *guminju*. At the time, her household owned the

usage rights to two units within a pavilion known as the *bajiaoting* 八角亭, ‘Eight-corner Pavilion,’ which is now one of the key sites on the tourism trail. According to Yueheng, who was 74 at the time of the interview, her family was approached by representatives of the VDC in 2012, who came to deliver them the news that their dwellings needed to be restored, *huifu* 恢复, and therefore their family needed to be relocated. In Yueheng’s words, she describes the encounter as follows:

In fact, my units weren’t toppling down yet. However, the neighboring ones were beginning to collapse. Yet, they don’t even let us do repairs. [When] mine started to collapse, they told me on the spot that we should relocate and that they would give us homestead land in exchange. (Interview, January 25, 2019, Heyang Village)

The issue of relocation and rehousing was further complicated at the time by the fact that the homestead land that the VDC promised was not yet in the possession of village authorities, who were actually in the process of having their application approved from higher up the governance ladder to appropriate this land for housing. Furthermore, it would also take time and money – paid out of villagers’ own pockets – to actually build a new house upon the land. For many of the households within the *guminju*, this posed a significant challenge. As mentioned above, their ongoing residency within the old village was a sign that they were the most financially vulnerable to begin with. The matter of rescuing and restoring collapsing heritage buildings, however, was urgent. Naturally this created tension within the narrow confines of the *guminju*, and rumors spread quickly between the thin wooden walls about the local state’s bullying tactics to threaten households out of their homes. Whether these claims were substantiated or not, what was certain was the fact that suspicion towards officials and their motives began growing. At the same time, certain villagers were themselves profiteering through attempts to leverage either their possession of heritage dwellings or of precious homestead land for greater gain from the

VDC. While some villagers exhibited behaviors of “rightful resistance” (O'Brien & Li, 2006), others were resorting to extortion for their personal interests. As I described elsewhere (Qian, 2017), Heyang’s development quickly stagnated in a state of ‘paralysis,’ and, ultimately, the social environment within the village were ‘poisoned’ by *xieqi* 邪气, ‘perverse winds,’ due to rumors, tensions, and various conflicting interests with few resources – including competent village leaders – for their satisfactory resolution.

As for Yueheng’s case, her household of six was temporarily relocated to another ancestral hall free of rent. This arrangement came after fierce negotiations with the VDC by her husband, whom Yueheng describes as *hennenggan* 很能干, very ‘capable.’ Five years later, they received a humble plot of homestead land in the new village area, upon which they built a new modern home out of their own pockets – a fact that Yueheng is still bitter about. Furthermore, having moved into the new village, Yueheng expressed sentiments of isolation and alienation, which is a feeling shared by several ‘relocated households,’ particularly the elders. Having lived her whole life within the old village; that was the ‘Heyang’ that she called home. Whereas the new village felt alien to her, despite being separated only by an ancient stone bridge. In addition to her physical re-/dislocation, Yueheng’s feelings of isolation also stemmed from the fact that she felt entirely disconnected from village affairs and what she knew to be her community. “We are no different from *waidiren* 外地人” she says, invoking a term that is typically used to describe outsiders; non-locals. Her feelings of alienation are further revealed through her response when I asked her about her thoughts on the restoration of the *bajiaoting*, her old residence, to which she replied: “What is there to be happy or sad about? I have no stake in it anymore” (Interview, January 25, 2019, Heyang Village). When asked about the tourism endeavor overall, she expresses even stronger feelings through the following:

Who cares if it [tourism] is good or not? Villagers don't even get any money from it. In any case, I've moved out now, what do I care about it? [...] Since last December when I moved [out] here, I don't know anything anymore. I don't know anything. And no one comes [out here] to inform us of anything. No one tells us anything about anything. We're not even informed when there are operas put on in the village anymore! We are just like *waidiren* [outsiders]! The only time they [local officials] come out here is during village elections – that's when they remember we still exist. That's when they need us. There are no public announcements, and at least on that side [of the bridge] they have public notices posted on walls. But over here on this side, there isn't even anyone to do public cleaning. The new village is just like the *waidi* [foreign land]. (Interview, January 25, 2019, Heyang Village)

Yueheng alone certainly cannot speak for all. However, her views certainly reflect new divisions and tensions within the village. Indeed, despite Heyang's claim to be a harbor to consume and bathe in *xiangchou*, for villagers like Yueheng, her *xiangchou* is her 'un-belonging;' it is the sense of loss, alienation, and anguish over a lost 'home.' This is echoed by her neighbor Zhu Fazhao, the member of another 'relocated household' *banqianhu*, when he was asked to comment on the concept of *xiangchou*:

*Xiangchou?* I've only heard that from the TV. I don't understand it. What I do know is *xiangchou* means *duodianchouchou* [多点愁愁 to have more to anguish or concern over]. *Xiangchou* means that they [officials] come to do tourism, and us villagers have more to *chou*. Us villagers are very *chou* [concerned], you know. *Xiangchou* means to give villagers more to *chou*, we are so *chou*. (Interview, January 25, 2019, Heyang Village)

Indeed, within the state's top-down efforts to construct an 'Economy of Xiangchou' through heritage and tourism, Fazhao brings to bear the critical question: to whom does this *xiangchou* belong, and who is this *xiangchou* constructed for? From Yueheng's comments and her insight on the lack of communication from officials, to Fazhao's remarks over '*xiangchou*,' the pair have vocalized a general dissatisfaction towards the officials' perceived prioritization over personal and political gain, at the expense of and neglect for villager needs. Meanwhile, the MC,

as I now turn to discuss, has been seen as an even more alienating imposition upon the villagers' lives.

#### **2.4.2. The Establishment of a New Governing Body**

Although tourism had been rendered an 'official' economic priority in the 2000s, it was still at a relatively early stage of development and rather small in scale. "It was mostly through word of mouth or friends of locals," said Teacher Zhu, when I asked him about earlier methods used to publicize Heyang's tourism. "Some people would go to places like Nanjing and Suzhou to hand out fliers though, but nothing much else beyond that" (Interview, July 27, 2018, Heyang Village). Indeed, there were few tourists, and those who came did not stay for long. Aside from the one family restaurant and the Zhu exhibit, there was little else for tourists to do. In fact, most of the activity took place right outside the *guminju*, in a bustling marketplace where locals would meet for breakfast, buy produce from butchers and farmers, and of course, stop by for a Jinyun pancake. In other words, as far as most villagers were concerned, it was business as usual.

This would change, however, when a new governing body was established above the VDC in 2011. As I mentioned earlier, this new governing body was officially known as the Jinyun County Heyang Ancient Dwellings Protection and Development Management Commission, and it was tasked specifically with the roles of *baohu* 保护 and *kaifa* 开发 – that is, the complementing and, as it turns out, also highly contradictory aims of the 'preservation' and 'development' of the cultural heritage site. The MC was created by the County government as a 'public service' and for the 'public good' of the village. Behind the scenes, the MC was also a product of the influence of several Heyang locals who – in the spirit of their imperial scholar-gentry ancestors – managed to climb the ranks as officials in the county government.

Knowing its own limits and seduced by the potential of receiving greater state resources and support, the VDC received the MC with open arms.

The introduction of the MC was initially well-received by Heyang's residents as well. In fact, even though the creation of the MC entailed the imposition of an entirely new governing and managing body upon the village, the act of 'doing tourism' was still a relatively participatory affair and villagers remained enthusiastic. Once established, one of the first things the MC did was put out a call to villagers for items that could be displayed in a new Heyang museum that they were trying to install in lieu of the earlier, humbler Zhu exhibition, although the Zhu clan remained the focal point of the new installation as well. Many villagers eagerly came forth to donate everything that they thought was of cultural and historic value to the cause. Items inherited and passed down from generations – including traditional Tang-era beds and bed frames, Ming-era vases, rare hairpins and mirrors, wicker baskets, candle holders, as well as agricultural tools used during the collective era – were brought out of storage, attics, and private collections. Dusted off and polished, they were no longer personal possessions, but artefacts 'borrowed' by the state for public use and display.

Tourism traffic did increase over the years and with the involvement of the MC. The majority of residents, however, were neither directly involved nor employed in the tourism business. Therefore, they never received any direct monetary reward from their participation, passive or active. Nevertheless, villagers delighted in the fact that their *guminju* was gaining increased recognition. Friends and relatives from neighbouring villages would come by to join in on the fuss, *courenao* 凑热闹, as well, sometimes even with a tinge of envy (Fieldwork, August 12, 2018, Heyang Village). However, this initial pride and enthusiasm waned quickly – trickling away as the anticipated funding and resources did not quite live up to the villager's

expectations either. Over time, the city and county governments turned their attention towards sites seen as more promising and profitable than Heyang's *guminju* within the county. The earliest seeds of resentment amongst residents of the *guminju* were sown at this time, and some even sought to retrieve their donated possessions, but to no avail.

These disappointments notwithstanding, in 2011, the *guminju* was entered into the sixth batch of Provincial-level Historical and Cultural Protection Unit, a high honour chosen by the State Council and the Zhejiang Provincial Government. This re-evaluation of the village's 'worth' re-ranked Heyang higher up on various governing bodies' list of priorities, and this time, Heyang village received even more attention from the county government. Two years later, Heyang's *guminju* rose higher in status yet again when it was listed among the seventh batch of *nationally* protected cultural heritage sites. In other words, it became a national treasure – Heyang had indeed been (re)claimed by the state.

Given its increased value, in 2012, members from the Jinyun County Development and Reform Bureau, members of the VDC, and other designated stakeholders came together to reconfigure the MC's authority and mandate over the development of the *guminju* (Qian, 2017, p. 4434). Together, they produced and signed a contract that bestowed the MC with a 50-year lease on the rights to use the village, which indicated the important role that tourism in Heyang village could play in the County's broader developmental plans. On paper, the MC was 'leasing' the *guminju* for the dual purposes of heritage protection and tourism development, and between these two mandates, they were to prioritize protection over development. In practice, however, the MC's role was more akin to the *de facto* state governing over village affairs and its residents, while the VDC have been relegated to a secondary, supportive role – their function to serve as the middleman between state, the MC, and society, the villagers. Many villagers' sentiments

towards the MC and its reconfigured role are expressed through the language of Zhu Guoqiang, when he says that in 2012, “the MC took over our *guminju*” (Interview, January 25, 2019, Heyang village).

## 2.5. Conclusion: Not another ‘Lijiang’

According to Svensson (2016), “when ancestral halls and villages are designated as heritage sites, their use and management often changes, and villages and lineages no longer fully control them” (p. 42). The *guminju*’s ascension to provincial and then later to a nationally recognized cultural heritage site is no different. However, this also meant that the entire historic natural village and all residing within had their futures handed over to whims of a new governing body. Through the MC, the state increased its control upon the *guminju*. Its reach penetrated all aspects of village life, and in turn, village life within the *guminju* became completely intertwined with the machinery of tourism. As I observed in earlier research, the bolstering of the MC’s role and authority essentially meant that:

everything – and everyone – encircled within the regions designated as ‘protected’ [fell] under the MC’s jurisdiction for the next half-century. As for those still residing within the *guminju*, ownership over their childhood homes, their inherited relics, and even the full agency over their own futures [became] a blur of public and private rights, property, and interests. (Qian, 2017, p. 4434)

This exemplifies the fact that the act of *becoming* heritage involves more than receiving a nice plaque. It is an act that will inevitably alter all aspects of the political economy and socioeconomic fabric of the village and beyond. Given the physical constraints for the *guminju*’s growth, the ‘beyond’ is already feeling the effects, as evidenced by discontent in the ‘new village.’ At the same time, residents in Yanshanxia village have also expressed feeling like the

“neglected younger sibling” compared to those native to Heyang proper (Fieldwork, July 2018, Heyang Village).

In Timothy Oakes’s (2013) terms, heritage and the ‘display of culture’ generates “its own unforeseen political dynamics” (p. 381), and, as observed in many heritage villages, its own unforeseen contradictions. In Oakes’s (2013) study of Tunpu culture in China’s Guizhou province, the seemingly straightforward concept of *baohu*, “preservation/protection,” is revealed to be complex in practice and can vary drastically depending on local conditions. As Oakes’s describes in the Tunpu case, local officials sought to adopt a “preservation-style development,” wherein the concept of *baohu* (protection) meant “tearing down many of the buildings and reconstructing the landscape according to a contemporary ideal that was thought to be attractive to tourists and ‘more representative’ of Tunpu culture” (p. 389). In other words, it was a nod to the “Lijiang model” of cultural and ethnic heritage “preservation” and “development” (Oakes, 2013). Lijiang, a prefectural-level city in China’s Yunnan province, is home to several ethnic groups, particularly the Naxi group. Its historical center is a UNESCO world heritage site and a very popular tourist destination for both international and domestic tourism. By all measures – from yearly revenue, to tourism traffic, and to name recognition across the world – Lijiang is considered one of the most successful cases of heritage-led tourism in China. According to Song et al. (2020), Lijiang’s ‘success’ as a tourism attraction positively impacted all facets of rural development for the surrounding region. They continue to argue that while the Hu Jintao’s administration ultimately failed to bridge the urban-rural divide through the “New Rural Construction Scheme,” Lijiang succeeded in raising annual rural household income in the mid-2000s, to the extent that some rural regions within and surrounding the main tourist attraction of the ‘Old Town’ were even wealthier than their urban counterparts (Song,

Cheong, Wang, & Li, 2020, p. 8). The authors accredit this community and region-wide success to the participatory and demutualized nature of Lijiang's tourism and related resources. In fact, some villages have even voluntarily set up cooperatives, wherein over 90% of the village households have agreed to invest and participate in auxiliary ethnic and cultural activities and attractions for tourists to Lijiang.

However, it is also because of the commercialization of the site, and, consequently of the extreme commodification – and even fabrication – of its ethnic and cultural history, that has drawn much scholarly critique to the 'Lijiang model' of heritage and tourism development. Indeed, the model has been the subject of many studies that unravel such processes as displays of cultural (in)authenticity and the overt creation of culture through the production of 'heritage' as a consumable form. With its emphasis on performance – whether a literal dance performance or the constant performing of 'authenticity' through traditional costumes, mass-produced memorabilia, or invented traditions and customs deemed to represent 'history' – Lijiang is a highly commodified spectacle and a site that imposes "Han chauvinism" and "internal colonialism" (J. Zhang, Xu, & Xing, 2017; see also Oakes, 1995; Picard & Wood, 1997; White, 2010; Y. Zhu, 2012). It invites both the tourist gaze and the urban gaze upon the ethnic rural 'other.' Beyond the performativity conducted by 'locals,' the spectuacularizaiton and "museumization" of place is manifest in the physical structures within the tourist site and its surrounding villages (Su & Teo, 2009). According to Song et al. (2020), villagers have indeed torn down their old homes and replaced them to match the supposed authentic "local flavor" of Lijiang (pp. 8-9) – a flavor that, ironically, was constructed and fabricated for the purposes of display and for attracting global and local capital. Such a process of "traditionalization" is rife with its own contradictions and destruction. However, seeing the economic success of Lijiang,

it is from this perspective where scholars such as Oakes (2013) have observed how local cadres in other rural areas have actively embraced and adopted the ‘Lijiang model’ for the development of their own heritage villages. Oakes’ (2013) case study of Mountain Cleft Village and Ox Fort Village in Guizhou describes how the two villages underwent a dramatic ‘traditionalization’ process to claim and profit from cultural authenticity. According to Oakes (2013), sites that were already ‘modernized’ – including streets freshly paved with cement and a basketball court that replaced a recently razed down temple – were effectively ‘traditionalized’ to cohere to a visual narrative of ‘cultural authenticity’ (p. 384). Like Heyang, this process was especially catalyzed by the central government’s recognition of the two villages as National-level Heritage Protection Sites in 2001, which indicated that the villages did possess some form of cultural ‘value,’ however defined, worth preserving. Yet, as Oakes (2013) astutely observes, prior to their recognition, “the villages were *not yet displays of themselves* [emphasis added]” (p. 384). The villages’ active ‘traditionalization’ saw to their “transition from unself-conscious community to cultural landscape, from village to village display” (Oakes, 2013, p. 384).

Aware of the issues of ‘authenticity,’ the approach taken by Mountain Cleft and Ox Fort is the direct opposite of the kind of ‘preservation’ that local officials intend for Heyang, which, to be sure, has its own set of contradictions as well. In fact, local officials who I interviewed from the village committee up to the county government referred to Lijiang numerous times, but as an example of what *not* to achieve. For instance, in June 2018, Mr. Li, the incumbent chairperson of the MC said the following:

Heyang in the 80’s must’ve been so beautiful, there were no modern buildings back then. It’s such a pity that I didn’t get to see it. That’s why now, as the head of the MC, I’ve made it our mission to prioritize the protection and restoration of the *guminju*. We’re repaving the pebbled roads of before. (Fieldwork, June 15, 2018, Heyang Village)

Meanwhile, in another capacity, Mr. Li and other MC representatives and government officials have also maintained the need for Heyang to remain a “living village,” *yigehuodecunluo* 一个活的村落 – a village that can not only retain its current residents, but also entice those who have left to return and remain (discussed in chapter 5). In other words, this is to ensure that the village does not, in Oakes’ (2013) words, turn “from village to village display” (p. 384). However, as tourism remains a focal point of the village’s future, ‘development’ does not necessarily entail Heyang becoming a sanctuary where tourists can escape the drawl of urban life, experience the ‘original flavour’ – *yuanzhiyuanwei* 原汁原味 – of history and ‘rurality;’ a place where one can live out their *xiangchou*. Tourism and the beautification, or ‘*xiangchou*-ization,’ of the village has become an especially important task. In fact, the central government and the propaganda machinery’s emphasis on *xiangchou* also prompted both the MC and the VDC into a frenzy to attain the coveted status of a ‘4A’ tourist attraction. As beautiful and idealistic as all of this may sound, this mission has proven to be very challenging, its difficulties lying precisely in the tasks of bringing together the imaginations of a ‘living village’ and a ‘cultural heritage relic.’

Heyang’s challenge is recognized by its residents as well. “This is a complicated place,” said Zhu Xiaolu, a man of 40 who is from Heyang and now works in the tourism industry. “People still live here. You can’t develop it the way Xitang<sup>17</sup> was developed, no one lives there” (Group Interview, February 13, 2018, Heyang Village). At the same time, residents also seem to concur with the need to retain life and people in Heyang. In the words of villager Zhu Qingru, for instance:

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<sup>17</sup> Xitang 西塘 is another historic village and heritage-protected site in Jiashan County, Zhejiang Province, known for its tourism.

I think the *guminju* still needs inhabitants. *Guminju*. *Gu-min-ju* 古-民-居 You need the ‘*min-ju*’ [inhabitants] in order for it to be a *guminju*... As long as the ‘*min* 民’ [people] are put first, then there will be a ‘*ju* 居’ [dwellings; home]. If there are no ‘*min*,’ then you might as well go see the museums in the Forbidden City. (Group Interview, February 13, 2018, Heyang Village)

Qingru and Xiaolu’s words illustrate how the mission of the MC and the desires of residents are not necessarily at odds with one another. However, as Zhu Zhangwei and Zhu Yueheng’s previously mentioned suspicions and frustrations indicate, villagers remain distrusting of the local state to a certain extent. This was especially the case after the MC was granted more authority in 2012, which marked the year when the seeds of resentment were planted deeply in Heyang’s soil.

As I have previously written, “the village [fell] into a series of conflicts common to China’s rural politics and governance (see, e.g., Chuang, 2015; Ho, 2005)... [and] residents in the *guminju* began referring to their home as the *kuminju*, a play on words replacing *gu* [古], for ‘ancient,’ with *ku* [苦], for ‘bitter’” (Qian, 2017, p. 4435). Although this was written based on fieldwork conducted in 2015, when I returned to Heyang for this project in 2018-2019, *kuminju* was still used quite frequently by villagers, particularly the older residents. Meanwhile, MC officials, including Mr. Li as well as cadres in the VDC, were all very adamant that *kuminju* had become a thing of the past. More specifically, all the governing bodies maintain that it was because of the previous cohort of officials and MC representatives and *their* lack of experience that caused villagers to incur ‘bitterness;’ Whereas under their new respective leaderships, things have ‘improved,’ villagers recognize the improvements, and, supposedly, no one says *kuminju* anymore (Group Interview, March 1, 2019, Heyang Village). Having visited numerous times over the years, I indeed witnessed many notable ‘improvements’ in the village, physical

and otherwise. Nevertheless, there has been a persistence of both a deep disconnect between villagers and the separate governing bodies, and a lack of coordination and communication between and within these governing bodies and various social groups amongst the villagers. Because of the disconnect and especially because of the tensions resulting from land and housing, class has emerged as a critical topic in contemporary Heyang's society, but it is one that is always discussed in language other than class. For instance, when talking about socioeconomic disparity in the village, Zhangwei remarked:

The village head and party secretary definitely live better than us common-folk, *laobaixing* 老百姓. What can you do? People who live well and have good family backgrounds would never speak about bitterness. It is only people who are not doing well that will tell you the truth. The village head, the party secretary, would they ever say [anything bad]? They wouldn't say a word. So, when you speak with them, you will leave Heyang thinking, 'oh wow, life in Heyang truly is great.' The phrase *kuminju*, would never be uttered by them, that's just how it is. (Group Interview, February 13, 2019, Heyang Village)

Zhangwei's words provide much to unpack. For one, by comparing the lives of the 'common folk,' *laobaixing*, with what he presumes to be the relative luxury lived by the village head and party secretary, he expresses a desire for a better life and more equality. However, there is a sense of powerlessness and resignation that cuts through his words as well. His tone reveals not only how he positions himself and those considered his "*laobaixing* brethren" socioeconomically lower than the cadres, but also how they are ultimately powerless before them. It is not the *laobaixing*'s word that matters. Rather, it is the cadres who have control over the narrative of life in Heyang, and especially within the *guminju*. Based on this, the official line maintains that "life in Heyang is now good," whereas for Zhangwei, *kuminju* very much remains a reality. There is a clear hierarchical divide between the *laobaixing* and the cadres, but Zhangwei does not ever use the language of "class" to delineate their perceived difference.

Rather, he uses the concept of *kuminju* and the officials' shunning of the term to communicate the inequality.

Indeed, Zhangwei represents a subset of a community that still lives within the *guminju* and, because of their financial hardship, are not only still encircled within the discourse of the *kuminju* but have also internalized their relative disadvantage. Zhangwei, in this sense, belongs to a new rural lower class, the poor peasantry of post-reform China. What is also noteworthy is how he relates – or perhaps conflates – his almost fatalistic subjectivity within his own home village vis-à-vis the village leadership, to the nation and the central government. When asked if he held any resentment towards the situation, he said the following:

I'm not dissatisfied, I'm not resentful. I'm just telling the truth, reality. I tell you; this is just the way society is. It's just like the politics at the central level. Xi Jinping was supposed to finish his term, but now they've reformed the constitution. If he chose to continue being president, he could, isn't that right? That's just how it is. I've already told you, our Heyang is like this too. They say, this party secretary will never change now. That's what they were saying back then, and this is what's being said now. Us common folk, out of 100 of us, 99 of us can see through this. But no cadre would admit this, of course. I'm just telling it like it is. (Group Interview, February 13, 2019, Heyang Village)

The extent to which, without any prompting, Zhangwei links the Party Secretary of the village directly to Xi Jinping – the Party Secretary of the CCP – is indicative of how he collapses the state-village relationship. In fact, bringing this discussion full circle, this mirrors the ways through which the fables behind the Zhu origins also collapse the immense distance between apical ancestor Zhu Qingyuan and the Emperor, between Heyang and the loci of state power.

For those who fall within a similar class as Zhangwei, *baohu*, 'preservation,' is secondary to their survival. Moreover, given their suspicions of the state, *baohu* is not something that they can see will improve their livelihood, especially if the promised fruits of

both *baohu* and *kaifa*, ‘development,’ cannot neither be seen nor experienced. What further complicates this, is that it is precisely those in Zhangwei’s difficult situation who are the ones that are still living within the *guminju*, the ones that are directly implicated and in the crosshairs of both protection and development. As I detail in the following chapters, these are also the bodies that the MC hopes to retain as residents in what they hope to remain a ‘living village.’ This places the MC and the VDC at the centre of the potentials and tensions that come with *baohu* and *kaifa*, preservation and development.

The questions that therefore arise include: 1) how can an already estranged state embed itself into an already fragmented and class-riven village society? and 2) how can the MC reconcile the goals of preserving ‘nostalgia’ and a form of ‘pastness’ whilst enabling ‘revitalization,’ and how does this inevitably impact the *guminju*’s residents? This set of questions rejoins my earlier discussion on the affect and effect of *xiangchou* in Heyang’s tourism development. Heyang is a site physically bound by its temporal ossification. It is an embodiment of a certain ‘nostalgia’ for Chinese culture, rich with potential to create a form of tourism that depends upon the building of a “rural idyll” that is at once an embodiment of tradition and ‘pastness;’ yet, in the words of Mr. Li, Heyang is “first and foremost a village” (Group Interview, March 1, 2019, Heyang Village). Indeed, Heyang is just one case in the complex and diverse Chinese landscape. It is neither representative nor exceptional – in many ways, it embodies the *xihan*; it is fairly unremarkable and has a rugged ‘beauty,’ yet for some reason it is noteworthy, having been featured in several high-production state-media programs (see Qian, 2017, pp. 4429-4433). However, given the complex dynamics unfolding in such a small space, it serves as a microcosm for an in-depth study of contemporary Chinese rural

politics and society. To echo one of my informants: “All of Chinese society is visible through Heyang” (Interview, August 11, 2018, Heyang Village).

### Chapter 3. From the Local to National; the Personal to the Civilizational

Drawing from Michael Burawoy's (2009) elaborations upon the Extended Case Method (ECM), this chapter discusses both the "macro-forces" as well as the "micro-processes" surrounding the construction, propagation, and utility of *xiangchou* in Heyang, Jinyun, and across China more broadly. This chapter illustrates the ways in which *xiangchou* provides the framework to understand how the 'macro-forces' of statecraft can impact the 'micro-processes' of everyday life in a village like Heyang, and conversely, how these 'micro-processes' can, in turn, influence central-level policies from the bottom-up. To invoke Burawoy (2009), I illustrate how *xiangchou* moves "from heaven to earth" and "from earth to heaven" (p. 10); as both a means and an end to influence the processes of and discourses surrounding the task of 'rural revitalization,' *xiangchou* precipitates from Xi to villager, from Heyang back to Beijing.

In practice, I illustrate how the central government's Rural Revitalization Strategy led to the Jinyun County's implementation of its own developmental strategy known as "*Xiangchou* Industries to Enrich the People," *xiangchoufuminchanye* 乡愁富民产业. Meanwhile, interviews with local county officials reveal how the county sought not only to coin the term "Xiangchou Industries," but also, and most ambitiously, to be recognized by the central government for what they hoped to be known as the "Jinyun model" of rural revitalization. Heyang, meanwhile, with its nationally prized heritage-site and its *Xiangchou* Tourism industry, became a focal point within both of these top-down and bottom-up processes. Before exploring these processes in detail, however, I begin first with an introduction of the research methodology used to inform both the theoretical and empirical research for this project, namely, the ECM. I detail the ways in which my research was carried out in Jinyun, and I disclose the complexities and unique facets of my own subject-position as, simultaneously and interchangeably, a

‘researcher,’ a ‘foreigner,’ and a ‘person of Heyang.’ In fact, it is ultimately what I consider to be my own *xiangchou* for Jinyun as a ‘non-National’ but ethnically Chinese Canadian that has inevitably led to and shaped this project. This chapter also presents the ethical considerations of this research, as well as the rationale behind why – beyond my own unique affective concoction of homesickness, nostalgia, tenderness, concern, and estrangement – Heyang was ultimately chosen as a case study to both observe *xiangchou* and to be studied through the lens of *xiangchou*.

### **3.1. Research Methodology: Exploring the Site and the Self**

The majority of the fieldwork conducted for this dissertation took place between June 2018 and February 2019. My time was divided between Heyang village, Xinjian Township, and the county seat in Jinyun, where I employed techniques of observation, participant observation, and individual and group interviews. While in Heyang, I was graciously invited to lodge in the home of the village leader and his wife. It was a multi-storey house in the new village area, but just a brisk three-minute walk from the main tourist site. Staying there afforded me incredible insight into the daily life of the village head, his duties as the elected representative of the villagers, as well as the interactions and relationships between elected officials, party members, and residents. In fact, there were days where I did not need to leave the house at all, as the door of their home was always open to all, quite literally. Villagers, party members, businessmen, or other officials from neighbouring regions would frequently march in unannounced with little to no hesitation. Some brought official business, some came to air their grievances, some came searching for the leader and his wife to play a game of *mahjong*, and others came just to kill time and catch up on the latest village gossip. I was fully exposed to the comings and goings of village life, the tourism enterprise, as well as the machinery of local village politics. I was

located right in the intersections of tradition and development and between the top-down and bottom-up vantage points of politics, society, and culture.

### **3.1.1. Participant Observation, Interviews, and Focus Groups**

When I was not in the village leader's home, I spent my time walking within the *guminju*, where I hoped to make my presence familiar to locals, and, importantly, to establish myself as a being separate from village directors, cadres, or any other form of 'leadership.' Over time, my participation in village life grew. I was invited to household gatherings, I attended local festivals and community events, I learnt to make the local delicacy of Jinyun *shaobing*, and I even joined several village tours in the capacity of a 'tourist' in the *guminju*. Most of my analyses are based upon my observations and experiences as an active or passive participant. Participation naturally involved extensive interactions with locals, and these interactions form an integral part of my understanding of the site. However, any of the direct quotations or indirect inferences used in this dissertation were taken only from conversations with people to whom I made clear, firstly, my subject-position as a researcher, and, secondly, those who explicitly consented to having their views and opinions used for the purpose of this research. While a few participants did agree to sign written agreements, most were verbal agreements of consent. In a largely informal economy, it was not always possible to receive written consent, as the presence of such documents risked being highly alienating, contextually inappropriate, and, not to mention, exclusionary, as some informants were illiterate (Wynn & Israel, 2018). Unless otherwise stated, all mentioned individuals in this dissertation were given pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

In February 2019, I also teamed up with two doctoral candidates from Simon Fraser University, Byron Hauck and Xiaoxing Zhang, to conduct focus group interviews. These focus groups were semi-structured, with questions pertaining to our separate research projects asked

in sequence, from understandings of the good life (Zhang X. , Forthcoming), the mass line and time-keeping practices (Hauck, 2020), and finally, sentiments and conceptualizations of *xiangchou*. Initially, we used systematic sampling, selecting every seventh person (a number generated at random) listed on the village household registry provided to our team by the village accountant. We visited the households of each randomly drawn individual to make initial contact to explain our project and to seek their participation and consent. We moved on to the next on the list if the first was absent. To broaden our sample size, we also posted notices across the village as a general call to invite participation. We designed the sessions to be a maximum of 1.5 hours in length and planned to hold them in the courtyard of the Heyang Institute for Rural Research,<sup>18</sup> which was a central and known location. However, despite receiving verbal agreements of commitment to the project at an agreed upon time, we found the turnout rate to be low on the day the focus groups were scheduled. With low participation, we reconsidered our strategy and decided instead to target ‘social groups’ or those with shared social roles within village life. As Hauck (2020) summarizes, the targeted groups included:

a group from Yanshanxia, a group of young entrepreneurs who had recently set up shops in the village, members of the Heyang Lotus Cooperative,<sup>19</sup> two separate groups from the fire brigade, the village tour guides and the security officer and ticket collector who work with them, and finally, female volunteers organized by the women’s association leader. (pp. 11-12)

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<sup>18</sup> This institute was established in 2015 by Professor Yuezhi Zhao as a physical and intellectual ‘base’ for researchers from around the globe conducting rural studies in China. Since its inception, several summer-school programs and intellectual fora have been held in this site, which, at the time of this writing, was hosted within a traditional courtyard in Heyang’s *guminju*.

<sup>19</sup> The Lotus Cooperative was a small, grassroots cooperative that was allocated a small lot of land by the VDC to plant, harvest, and sell lotus as a way to generate some income for the village. Although a move towards a form of collective economy, the cooperative struggled soon after becoming established due to restrictions placed by the tourism enterprise and the increased power bestowed upon the MC.

In addition to the above, focus groups were also conducted with members from the elected village committee, as well as employees in the Heyang Ancient Heritage Dwellings Preservation and Development Management Commission (MC). We decided to hold the focus groups in locations selected by the members, often homes or workplaces, to maximize comfort, trust, familiarity, and to neutralize the potential power-dynamics between us researchers and the participants, as well as among the participants themselves (Seidman, 1991, p. 110; Ortiz, 2013, p. 43). With much credit owed to the research of Kurt Lewin (1947), the concept of “group dynamics” has been widely studied in applied research methodologies to illustrate the very complex, multifaceted, overt, and even covert ways in which the very dynamic of being in a ‘group’ inevitably influences individual participants’ responses and behaviours. Our focus groups in Heyang were certainly not immune to the effects of group dynamics, such as normative influence and the phenomenon of free riding (Fern, 2001, pp. 109-110). For instance, in a focus group with local tour guides, a ticket collector, and a security officer, it was evident that one tour guide was especially dominant during the discussion due to the fact that she not only had a stronger personality, but also because of her relatively higher ‘status’ amongst her peers as a more seasoned tour guide and as a more established and ‘competent’ worker in the eyes of the local state. What resulted was a noted demureness from the other participants relative to her loquacity. In fact, this was something that she noticed as well during the discussion. At one point she turned to the others to say, “well, why don’t you guys talk? I’m the only one talking!” (Group Interview, February 23, 2019, Heyang Village). In other groups, there were also instances where some members interjected to answer on behalf of other participants, or where participants automatically deferred to others to answer on their behalf because of their self-perceived and internalized positionalities as the ‘lesser-informed’ and the ‘lesser-educated.’

This was especially noticeable in groups with elders. The ‘group dynamic’ inevitably influenced, interfered with, or even altered individual responses. However, it was within these moments of group interactivity that revealed not only the power dynamics within specific social groups, but in certain instances, they also reflected the embedded and shifting hierarchies of cultural, social, and even symbolic capital in Heyang at large. By ‘embedded and shifting,’ I emphasize the ways in which new social roles were imbued with cultural and social capital by traditional structures and institutionalizations of hierarchies. For instance, as I explore in chapters 5 and 7, the position and social function of the ‘tour guide’ became a hierarchical delineation established between ‘regular villager’ and ‘employee of the MC’ only because of the new social role created through the tourism enterprise; meanwhile, subtle hierarchies formed between the tour guides because of their individual ‘proximities’ to the orbit of power. By ‘power,’ I refer to ‘the state’ in the form of the MC, which, as I discussed in the previous chapter and in an earlier publication (Qian, 2017), was a governing body imposed upon the village’s existing governance structure. With the explicit consent of the participants, we audio-recorded the discussions and stored them on a private external hard drive owned by Zhang. Zhang ran the recordings through a program called *Xunfeitingjian* 讯飞听见 (iflyrec) that digitally transcribed the audio into text, which we labelled as ‘rough transcriptions.’ From there, Zhang manually edited the rough transcriptions for clarity in places where the program could not decipher the language, whether due to regional accents, background noise, or the usage of the local dialect. We labelled these versions as the ‘clean transcriptions.’ Both the rough transcriptions and the clean transcriptions were uploaded into a shared digital drive that only Zhang, Hauck, and I had access to. I provided translations for select transcriptions from Mandarin Chinese into English, which were also shared into the drive.

Aside from these focus groups, I also conducted numerous individual interviews. As with the focus groups, these interviews were audio-recorded only with the participants' consent. I manually transcribed these interviews in a word document, first in mandarin Chinese and then translated them into English. I transferred and stored these recordings on an external hard drive. In instances where audio-recordings were not used – for instance, when the discussion took place in a loud environment, or if it was an official meeting with cadres where I did not receive the explicit consent from everyone in the room to record the discussion – I instead took notes by hand in a notebook. I would transcribe my notes into full text and with as much detail as possible while still fresh in my mind. I also kept a separate field journal where I wrote down observations and recorded thoughts and brainstormed ideas throughout my field work. Pseudonyms and other codes were used to remember informants, in order to minimize as much as possible any traces of written or audio records of personally identifiable information.

Without the influence of group dynamics, the one-on-one interviews provided more intimate settings that placed emphasis on individual narratives and experiences, thereby allowing for more in-depth and particularized case studies. These individual discussions lasted from 30 minutes to over two hours, and they varied from being semi-structured to completely unstructured. They generally took place outside of the informants' homes or at another place of their choosing. Most of my interviews within the *guminju* were with local elders, whose preferred timekeeping method was informal and based upon mealtimes or routine tasks. I invited participation to interview during casual conversations that took place organically or haphazardly in our respective day to days. If the invitation was accepted, I would ask what the best time for interviewing would be in the following day. Normally, it was the afternoon, *xiawu* 下午, right after lunch (normally taken at 11am) and before young children were off from school (around

2:30-3:00pm). Most of the elder residents in Heyang were charged with childcare responsibilities, as, similar to many household configurations in other parts of China's rural landscape, their adult children had *gone out* to support the family – the absence of a generation revealing a lack of work and an embedded culture of migration in Heyang (chapters 4 and 5). As I became more comfortable and familiarized with life in the *guminju*, I found convenience sampling to be one of the most effective ways to gain trust and recruit participation. In the beginning, however, I relied heavily on snowball sampling, starting with those with whom I had pre-established connections based on my own subjectivity as a 'person of Heyang.'

### 3.1.2. Reflections on Reflexivity

Although I was born and raised in Canada, my direct maternal lineage is rooted in the natural village of Yanshanxia (see chapter 2, p. 39). My direct paternal lineage, meanwhile, lies in Xinjian Township.<sup>20</sup> I lived in Yanshanxia for two years when I was 18-months old. I was placed under the care of my maternal grandparents and the rest of the households with whom we shared a large residential courtyard, *shibajian* 十八间 (Figure 3). Fei Xiaotong (1947/1992) describes rural China as society where “[e]very child grows up in everyone else’s eyes” (p. 41). Although Fei’s work was written in 1947, it was still every bit as relevant in the 1990s when I was in Yanshanxia. In fact, during my fieldwork in the 2010s, Fei’s words were still apt in describing the foundations of Heyang as “a society without strangers, a society based totally on the familiar” (p. 41) – notwithstanding the tourists, the visiting cadres, the small handful of new entrepreneurs, and the occasional media crews, of course. Indeed, a few villagers remembered me, and they remembered me as the wild child who loved eating raw tofu. In fact, one of my

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<sup>20</sup> Now a township, Xinjian was historically made up of several villages, each one represented a different work unit during the collective era.

first interlocutors was the very merchant who made sure to give my former toddler self a small morsel of freshly made tofu as he made his rounds in the village. When I returned in 2018, he was already in his late 80s, and I visited him whenever I made my way to Yanshanxia. We had great conversations; as best as I could in my limited *jinyunhua* (the local dialect), and as best as he could in his old age. It was through these kinds of interactions – or *reunions* – where I was able to meet other villagers to interview and speak with. It had been well over two decades since I lived there. I inevitably became an unfamiliar face, but Heyang was never an unfamiliar place. Indeed, it was *xiangchou* – both my personal sentiment and as a subject of academic inquiry<sup>21</sup> – that brought me (back) to Heyang.

My subject-position in relation to Heyang has therefore always been that of an overseas visitor or temporary returnee. Aside from that first stay in Yanshanxia, and later, several summer vacations in my hometown(s), I have never ‘lived’ in Heyang – or China for that matter.



Figure 3: A ‘Shibajian’ residential courtyard  
Photo by Author

<sup>21</sup> Fook (1999) describes the reflexive method in the very selection and conceptualization of research (p. 15).

More precisely, I have never been through the forms of socialization that youth and young adults typically undergo by virtue of being ‘from Heyang’ or ‘from Xinjian.’ To be sure, all researchers that conduct fieldwork need to grapple – often uncomfortably – with their identities and subject positions as a ‘researcher entering the field.’ As Tamara Jacka (2006) articulates, “[i]dentities are not fixed attributes. Rather, they are continually shifting between different overlapping and conflicting subject positions” (p. 13). While Jacka’s presence as an ‘outsider’ during her fieldwork in the outskirts of Beijing was more immediately visible, mine was less obvious. Despite my physiological ‘sameness,’ it was my inability to fluently speak *jinyunhua* and my sometimes too-north-american-sounding-mandarin and mannerisms that betrayed me, revealing my status as an ‘outsider.’ However, it would be my reference to my parents, my childhood, my surname, and my connections to family members known within the village that redeemed my belonging. Not a *conceptual anomaly* – a term I borrow from Dorinne K. Kondo (1986) in her detailed account of her subjectivity as a Japanese American conducting fieldwork in Japan – I was instead the (great)(grand)daughter of so-and-so, the ‘overseas returnee.’ I had both the face of a stranger and a local. I was a person that not many locals could immediately associate to a name or personal memory, but whose identity was inextricably intertwined with theirs.

Machteld de Jong, Frans Kamsteeg, and Sierk Ybema (2013) describe ethnographic fieldwork as a ‘balancing act’ between distancing and immersing. Similar to the way in which de Jong approached her fieldwork involving Moroccan-Dutch students (de Jong, Kamsteeg, & Ybema, 2013), my approach to Heyang was a/n (un)conscious and oftentimes imperfect balance between insider-outsider, returnee-newcomer, local-foreigner, relative-researcher. Whilst gaining access to Heyang was a task made simpler by my intimate connections to the site, it was imperative for me to “somehow preserve the newcomer’s capacity for wonderment and

adopt a habitus of surprise” (de Jong, Kamsteeg, & Ybema, 2013, p. 171). Although, finding ‘surprises’ was hardly ever an issue, as Heyang was constantly undergoing some form of change in unexpected ways, or, conversely, it was surprisingly *unchanging* in areas where I expected development. Furthermore, while cultural immersion is critical to developing an understanding ‘from within,’ de Jong, Kamsteeg, and Ybema (2013) explain how there is also a need for a certain distance lest “fieldworkers either get ‘lost’ in the complexities of the field, or are caught up in the ‘everydayness,’ the ‘infra-ordinary’” (p. 170). Here, they invoke Georges Perec’s (1989) concept of *l’infra-ordinaire*, the ‘infra-ordinary,’ a term he used throughout his development of ‘endotic ethnography;’ a study of the *habitual*, the ‘endotic,’ rather than the exotic. Perhaps, my study of Heyang was at once ‘endotic’ and ‘exotic.’

Distancing also meant my responsibility as a researcher to “maintain a reflexive distance from the field” (de Jong, Kamsteeg, & Ybema, 2013, p. 171). Jan Fook (1999) simplifies the concept of reflexivity as an ability for the researcher to locate, understand, and factor in the ‘self’ in the picture that is being studied, and to understand how the very presence of the ‘self’ and the very act of research can influence the situation that is being researched (p. 12). Fook (1999) further details how researchers are “whole people” who “experience in context,” and how aspects of the ‘self’ include:

our own subjectivity (including our embodiment, biography, values, ethics, emotions, cognitive constructions and theoretical constructions); reactivity effects of the research act; and interactions with research participants, other researchers, and data. (p. 12)

Because of my ‘closeness’ to Heyang, reflexivity was critical in my ethnographic practice. Not to mention the fact that the very inquiry into *xiangchou* – an emotion, a form of affect, or even

an *ordinary affect*, per Kathleen Stewart (2007) – is in and of itself demanding of constant theoretical reflexivity.

To be reflexive is to be cognizant of our own biases and personal contexts of discovery and being. No matter how (un)related the researcher is to the site of study, their very presence influences change – sometimes even before their physical arrival ‘to the field.’ Therefore, the very practice of ethnography involves reflexivity. Some scholars, notably, Pierre Bourdieu, have championed reflexivity as a research method itself (see for instance, Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Fook, 1999; Burawoy, 1999; Sköldbberg & Alvesson, 2017; Lumsden, 2019). That is, *as a process*, reflexivity becomes more than “a safeguard to apply in the analysis of data lest interpretations be ‘too subjective,’” and is instead “a stance integral to the research process” (Fook, 1999, p. 11). Reflexivity as method is to raise “reflective understanding” to the level of “explicit consciousness,” explains Michael Burawoy (1998), who applies this understanding of reflexivity to his conceptualization of “reflexive science,” which he explains achieves the following:

Reflexive science starts out from dialogue, virtual or real, between observer and participants, embeds such dialogue within a second dialogue between local processes and extralocal forces that in turn can only be comprehended through a third, expanding dialogue of theory with itself. (p. 5)

This understanding of reflexive science ultimately forms the basis of Burawoy’s elaborations upon the Extended Case Method (ECM). He posits the ECM as the application of “reflexive science to ethnography in order to extract the general from the unique, to move from the ‘micro’ to the ‘macro,’ and to connect the present to the past in anticipation of the future, all by building on preexisting theory” (p. 5). Reflexivity and the ability to balance between identities proved advantageous in different scenarios. For instance, the title of ‘researcher from the University of

Oxford' gained me far more access to cadres and other officials, especially in the county-seat, where status and social appearances mattered. However, in the village setting, my title as a 'researcher from a foreign institution,' was alienating. Conversations with local villagers began in a similar fashion, where my questions would be met with reluctant answers that reflected a sort of 'self-pitying defiance' vis-à-vis what I presumed was their assumptions of my self-perceived 'superiority' as being 'from abroad.' "I have nothing to say," would be an oft used phrase at beginning of these discussions. "I have no voice," would be a common response when asked why. Other similar responses included "I'm uneducated," and "I'm just a regular farmer." Therefore, the disclosure of my familial ties to Heyang helped melt the perceived distance between my informant and myself. Moreover, in order to ensure I did not overlook the habitual or apply assumptions to the ordinary, many of my interviews were completely unstructured. Such interviews involved detailed descriptions of what the informants felt the need to speak about, rather than topics I predetermined as necessary to 'research.'

### **3.1.3. The Extended Case Method and its 'Four Extensions'**

I chose Heyang as my primary case study for several reasons. For one, this was a practical consideration, as Heyang is the village that I am most familiar with, and which I have the most access to in terms of resources, knowledge, and contacts. Accessibility to the field site and having preestablished networks and connections within the site was especially important considering the limited time frame of this project. Moreover, Heyang was also chosen for its 'embeddedness' in this entire framework of *xiangchou*, as well as in its situatedness in the overarching developmental 'turning point.' Indeed, Heyang is among one of the several thousand quintessential villages now 'protected,' 'preserved,' and promoted as 'traditional village' in contemporary China. Having also received several national-level designations and

recognitions for the village itself and its tourism industry, Heyang is an especially appropriate case study to observe from both the top down and from the bottom up. As Burawoy explains, the ECM is premised on “four extensions:” 1) extending the observer to the participant, 2) extending observations over space and time, 3) extending out from process to force, and 4) extending theory (Burawoy, 2009, pp. 44-55). Through Heyang, all four ‘extensions’ could be achieved. My own positionality, as I discussed above, provided thorough reflexive considerations to ‘extend’ outward to various informants from the position of the ‘self’ as both an observer and ‘returnee.’ Although this was not a longitudinal study *per se*, my own knowledge and familiarity of Heyang and Jinyun more broadly – from both a personal and academic standpoint – helped extend the temporal parameters and understandings of my research. Meanwhile, having access to key stakeholders from the village up to the county enabled an extension of this research across space; notably, from Heyang village, to Xinjian township, to the Jinyun county seat. Its designations at the national level, further ‘extends’ this research from Heyang to Beijing. In fact, since 2015, Heyang has featured in several major state-media productions – all of which emphasized and propagated the theme of *xiangchou*. As I analyzed elsewhere (Qian, *The Political Economy and Cultural Politics of Rural Nostalgia in Xi-Era China: The Case of Heyang Village*, 2017), Heyang was featured in a video montage that accompanied the performance of “Xiangchou” during CCTV’s 2015 Spring Festival Gala, and in the same year, Heyang was also the star of an entire episode of “Jizhu Xiangchou,” a high-production documentary series produced by CCTV, with the backing of the CCP’s Publicity Department, the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development, the National State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television; and the National State Administration of Cultural Heritage. Considered in tangent with Heyang’s pivotal role in

various state policies,<sup>22</sup> this also makes the village an appropriate case study to observe the “extension” from process to force. Indeed, Heyang is part and parcel of both the discursive shaping of the countryside as a place filled with *xiangchou*, whilst, simultaneously, policies dressed as ‘Xiangchou’ are shaping the village.

Lastly, while each form of extension is important for the ECM, theory is an essential part of the ECM as it “guides interventions, it constitutes situated knowledges into social processes, and it locates those social process in their wider context of determination” (Burawoy, 2009, p. 55). Observations and experiences in the field can either conform to or deviate from previous knowledge and assumptions, as well as assessing reasons for similarity or difference is where the researcher is able to attest to, extend, challenge, and form new theorizations on the complex processes happening in the broader world (Burawoy, 2009; Barata, 2012).

When I initially conceived of this project, I sought to understand the ways in which tourism impacted Heyang and its villagers and to inquire whether or not this industry, especially as it was rebranded under ‘Xiangchou,’ could help further develop the village and ‘improve’ the lives of its residents. Having previously engaged with Heyang in an academic capacity, and as a frequent visitor and ‘returnee’ myself, I was already aware of the challenges, contentions, and conflicts that the tourism industry both faced and caused. I knew of the grievances of villagers, who lamented their *guminju* 古民居, ancient dwellings, had become a *ku-minju* 苦民居, ‘bitter’-dwellings. However, I knew as well that many of the rifts and tensions between state and society were caused not so much by mal-intent and malicious cadres – although there were certainly questionable motives at times – but it was predominantly miscommunication that led

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<sup>22</sup> This includes its most recent recognition as a “key village for rural tourism” by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism in August 2020, discussed in chapter 1, and Jinyun County’s “Xiangchou Industries Plan,” discussed later in this chapter.

to the deep mistrust that grew between villagers and officials, and among villagers and among officials. Having also spoken with residents and the officials that hailed from Heyang themselves, I was aware that, all politics aside, there was simply a desire for life to be better in their hometown. Therefore, I sought to return to Heyang and examine its “development” through the theoretical framework of the “will to improve” (Li, 2007). The concept of the “will to improve” is derived by Tania Murray Li, whose *tour-de-force* monograph studied the intentions and actions of various “trustees”<sup>23</sup> to improve lives, landscapes, and livelihoods throughout Indonesian history. Introducing her concept, Li (2007) explains how the act of improving populations requires the Foucauldian sense of a “government rationality,” and that there are two key practices required to implement ‘improvement’ programs: 1) problematization, and 2) “rendering technical” (pp. 6-7). Put together, the government rationality behind the ‘will to improve’ requires rendering legible the site slated for ‘improvement,’ and drawing out the ‘problem’ that improvement is meant to resolve.

In Heyang, the very concept of ‘improvement’ is contradictory for the key trustees, which are the MC and the VDC. On the one hand, the MC’s task was to oversee development and protection of the heritage site, whereas the VDC, and the elected committee in particular, was tasked with the *welfare* of the entire administrative village. These two, as I discussed in the previous chapter, proved to be two incongruent and conflicting tasks. Therefore, the “gap between what is attempted and what is accomplished” was truly inevitable (Li, 2007, p. 1). If ‘improvement’ means to make something existing ‘better,’ then the desire to ‘improve’ tourism, which entails the task of preserving heritage, works against the desire to ‘improve’ the living conditions of locals, which entails necessary renovations and infrastructural upgrades to the

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<sup>23</sup> Li (2007) defines “trustees” as those who “occupy a position defined by the claim to know how others should live, to know what is best for them, to know what they need” (p. 4).

very dwellings that are meant to be ‘preserved’ – or, in local terms, to *xiujiurujiu* 修旧如旧, that is, to repair the ‘old’ as ‘old’ (Figure 4). As I discussed in the previous chapter, this incongruence was communicated to me clearly by stakeholders from all walks of life. They acknowledged that there was a conflict between the need to ‘improve’ Heyang as a heritage-based tourism industry and the desire to sustain and ‘improve’ upon Heyang as ‘living village.’ The pegging of Heyang’s ‘development’ to tourism – and more specifically, to *xiangchou* tourism – therefore meant that the various ‘wills’ to improve would always be at odds with the various meanings of ‘improvement.’ In fact, by 2018, the ‘improvement’ of Heyang would be an even more important task for not only the village, but the entire county. As I detail further below, the success of ‘Heyang’ as a tourist attraction became a central component of the county’s developmental plan for 2018-2022, known as “*Xiangchou* Industries to Enrich the People.” By virtue of its stated goals to generate more income, industry, and, above all, create more opportunities for *local* employment and entrepreneurship, the supposed ‘will’ behind the inception of this plan is to improve upon the livelihood and welfare of the village. Ironically, it is the very ‘people’ that this plan was trying to ‘enrich’ who had thus far felt the most excluded and even neglected by tourism and the whole industry that was built around “*Xiangchou*.” The difficulty was therefore in recognizing what ‘improvement’ meant: who has the authority to determine what ‘improvement’ is and for whom is this ‘improvement’ done for? In light of these questions, I returned to Heyang with the desire to understand *xiangchou* in relation to the multifaceted and complex layers within this concept of ‘improvement’ and the various stakeholders’ “will to improve” the village.



Figure 4: Renovation sites within the GMJ using 'traditional' materials  
Photo by Author

However, once I set foot into Heyang and began observing things from the 'bottom-up,' or, to invoke Burawoy (2009), to move from 'earth to heaven,' I realized that what I was seeking was not necessarily answers and perspectives surrounding the 'improvement' of the village. In fact, from interviews with residents within the *guminju* and in the new village area, it became clear to me that their views of Heyang, tourism, and the various changes that they have witnessed were neither evaluated nor commented upon from the lens of 'improvement.' To illustrate, I return to the exchange I had with Zhu Yueheng, whom I introduced in the previous

chapter. To restate, Yueheng's household used to reside in the 'Eight Corner Pavilion' within the *guminju*, but in 2011, they were told by the VDC to relocate due to the fact that the Pavilion needed to be repaired and was to become a key tourist attraction. When I asked her in 2019 whether or not she was happy about the improvements made to her former dwellings, her response was of the effect that those 'improvements' had nothing to do with her; that she had "no stake in it anymore." What did matter, however, was that she had a roof over her head. "In any case, I already gotten my homestead land," she said, as we spoke outside her modern building. Indeed, despite the isolation she ultimately felt in the new village, she was, in her words, "satisfied. I'm satisfied as long as I have a home to live in (Interview, January 25, 2019, Heyang Village).

This attitude of seeming 'indifference' towards the *guminju*'s improvement was fairly common, and it is also exhibited in the following comment made by the village head when asked about villagers' opinions on the preservation of Heyang's *guminju* as a heritage site:

Villagers still need to receive some form of benefits [from tourism]. There are some villagers who do have money, and [therefore] they don't care if the village is heritage protected or not. Some people don't have money. So, for instance, they would want to tear down their old dwellings to build a new one, this saves money. Everyone has different mentalities. If you have money, then you can build a home elsewhere, and [therefore] what happens to the village doesn't matter to you. But if you don't have money, you won't have anywhere to live. (Group Interview, February 25, 2019, Heyang Village)

To further clarify his point, the state of the *guminju* and its protection has little import for villagers who have the means to move out and live elsewhere. Those whose living situations were put in jeopardy by the development of heritage-based tourism, however, approached the concept of 'development' with much more suspicion. They expressed this suspicion in the form of criticism towards the VDC and what the disgruntled villagers perceived to be cadres'

selfishness, neglect, and corruption. Similarly, when I asked other villagers about their opinions or suggestions for the improvement of tourism, the responses I received most frequently were of the effect of: “What do I know,” “How would people like us know anything,” “no comment,” and so on. In fact, it was difficult to retrieve substantive answers from questions that related directly to “improvement.” “Improvement,” and similarly “development,” were terms they associated with actions of the state, and therefore separate from their day to days. This is not to say, however, that villagers had no interest in the state of Heyang; quite on the contrary, they were very concerned for their hometown. However, their method of expressing this concern was not through the language of improvement.

Whilst the above pertained largely to the village elders, this was also evidenced amongst those of working age. Zhu Ziguang, a laborer in his 50s and a cyclical migrant, for instance, spent nearly two decades as a migrant. Despite having been absent from Heyang for most of his adult life, he still considers Heyang his ‘home’ and the place he is most familiar with. He expresses this in the following:

We’ve turned our backs to our hometown at a young age in order to hustle. Now we can hardly recognize anybody when we come home, but they still feel familiar, [even though] I can’t call anyone by name... (Group Interview, February 13, 2019, Heyang Village)

Ziguang represents a generation of out-migrants, many of whom left Heyang to pursue aquaculture, particularly duck breeding and shrimp farming. As I discuss in chapter 4, most have out-migrated not necessarily to pursue other forms of socialization, but they left due to a lack of options at home. Their intention to leave was so that they could eventually fulfill the desire to ‘return,’ and to (re)settle with the ability to provide financially for the next generation and provide the material comforts for the generation above. Had he no dependents, he explains

how he would live in Heyang, where he could “get by” in terms of basic subsistence and leisure. However, with two daughters attending university and a set of parents and in-laws in Heyang, he had little choice but to find work elsewhere. In his words:

Well, you see, my two daughters are going to school, I feel a lot of pressure. We talk about urbanization, urbanization; but really all of this means is that everything is now operating under a market economy — you have to fend for yourself and hustle for everything. There are no opportunities or prospects in the village, and without income, I can’t afford to raise my kids. We are forced to leave and search for opportunities. (Group Interview, February 13, 2019, Heyang Village)

Therefore, when asked about his opinions on development and “improvement” in Heyang, he ultimately expressed:

We do wish that the leadership can work harder and get tourism going, that way, we can return and start our own businesses [*fanxiangzijichuangye* 返乡自己创业]. I don’t want to continue my life drifting elsewhere, I wish to come home and work, [that way] I can take care of the elders too. (Group Interview, February 13, 2019, Heyang Village)

In other words, “improvement” means to be able to have the conditions to *facilitate return*. Interestingly, this was similarly alluded to by one of Ziguang’s daughters, who was also a participant of this focus group. During the time of the interview, she was a university student at an institution in Fuzhou, the capital city of Fujian province in Southeast China. She was born in Fuzhou but raised in Heyang by her grandparents as a ‘left-behind child.’ She knew little of Heyang otherwise, but it had become customary for her to ‘return’ with her parents during the holidays. At the age of 24, she expressed a preference for city-life, a place and lifestyle that she associated with the necessary rite of passage to ‘work hard,’ climb the corporate ladder, and become financially independent – to ‘make it,’ so to speak. At the same time, however, she also acknowledged the appeal of the village, where she considered life to be much ‘simpler,’ more

leisurely, and ultimately, a place that she might eventually aspire towards ‘returning’ to – if there were opportunities to do so, that is. In her words, the “cake is too small here; the cake is already small in the cities, let alone in the countryside” (Group Interview, February 13, 2019, Heyang Village).

Ziguang’s daughter touches upon an important point, which is the way life in the countryside is contrasted to lifestyles in China’s modern cities. It highlights the ‘discursive shift’ that moves away from denigrating images of the countryside and the country bumpkins – commonly abbreviated as the *zangluancha* 脏乱差, the ‘dirty, messy, shabby’ – towards imageries and imaginings of the “rural idyll” and the kind, ‘simple-folk’ who live there. Although Ziguang’s daughter had yet to enter the workforce and therefore had yet to fully experience the ‘white-collar hustle,’ she is still among a generation where the phenomena of burnout and of ‘involution’ are pervasive and increasingly crippling – spiritually, mentally, and physically. I discuss this in chapter 6, where a cohort of youth a few years older than Ziguang’s daughter have materialized their versions of the ‘rural idyll’ by relocating to Heyang. They are the *fanxiangqingnian* 返乡青年 “return youth,” who are now entrepreneurs in the countryside, where the cake may be small, but at least they have the free time and energy to enjoy the small morsel. Notably, these urbanized youth were given the opportunity by the county and township governments to start businesses in the village – and with generous financial assistance and policies, to boot. Conversely, many like Ziguang – still drifting and still homesick – were still awaiting the opportunity to return. The rationale behind this discrepancy, as far as cadres in the MC were concerned, was the higher social and cultural capital, and therefore the increased financial capital, that the youth could presumably bring to the tourism enterprise. Such an assumption is partly colored by the cadres’ own internalized hierarchies of the ‘urban’ and the

‘urbanized’ as being more capable than the rural, and implicitly, the local. Furthermore, as an institution whose sole *raison-d’être* is to oversee heritage protection and tourism development, being able to attract and retain entrepreneurs who were perceived as ‘higher quality’ was of utmost importance. As the village Party Secretary remarks:

their [the MC’s] only role is to work on Heyang. If changes aren’t noticeable, then the County government can directly reprimand them. Therefore, they are obliged to do development. (Group Interview, February 25, 2019, Heyang Village)

As such, by 2018 and the county’s unveiling of the “Xiangchou Industries” plan, the incumbent director of the MC had an even greater interest both personally and in terms of his own career advancement, to showcase his achievement of “Xiangchou” in Heyang.

Indeed, the secret of the ECM, according to Burawoy (2009), is that “theory is not discovered but revised, not induced by but improved, not deconstructed but reconstructed” (p. 11). Whilst engaging with villagers – when moving from the ‘micro’ back to the ‘macro’ – it became clear to me that the framework of ‘improvement’ was limited. In fact, in some instances they even risked being alienating. Although ‘improvement’ in the broadest sense of the term was certainly an underlying goal for all involved, what I was observing was more aptly understood within the framework of *desires*. Specifically, it was various desires to return or to entice return to Heyang. Ultimately, *xiangchou* that provided the language and lens through which to *articulate* and make sense of these desires of return. In other words, my return to Heyang for further academic inquiry was a discovery of *xiangchou* as an *articulation of desire* during a potential “turning point” in China’s developmental path.

In Heyang, I listened to the things that villagers deemed were important and that mattered in their lives: the whereabouts of out-migrated family members and the anticipation of

their return, memories from their childhood and the nostalgia felt for an irretrievable past, their concerns over the welfare of village elders, their lament over a lost sense of village cohesion and community, and, ultimately, their personal stories of out-migration and return. These are the ‘micro-processes’ of everyday life in Heyang. Yet, while seemingly ‘habitual,’ or indeed, *infra-ordinary*, it was precisely these ‘micro-processes’ of the ‘mundane’ that were directly caught in the crosshairs of tourism, development, and indeed, the enterprise of *xiangchou*. In fact, all of this is captured by the passionate words of Teacher Zhu during a group interview. Teacher Zhu was not only one of the first to be involved with tourism, but he also gave up his teaching career to devote himself entirely to ensuring the protection of Heyang’s heritage. His personal calling to assist in the preservation effort, which is deserving to be told in full, is as follows:

I helped lay the foundations for Heyang’s Heritage Protection and Development. I was a *yuanlao* 元老 [‘founding member,’ ‘originator’] you could say. When [tourism] started in 2000, I gave up my teaching and even gave up my own kindergarten, which I founded, to someone else. I put my all into this work. In fact, in the first two years, I didn’t ask for any compensation or a penny in payment. I worked for free. Why did I do this? For one, I think the structures and buildings in our Heyang *guminju* – these ancestral halls, these residential courtyards, these exposed bricks and white-powdered walls<sup>24</sup> – are indeed the riches that ancestors have left for us Heyang descendants. I cannot let our generation destroy these precious inheritances. This was the idea that I held when I decided to participate in the preservation work. Secondly, I think China’s history, including our rural history, China’s history cannot be cut apart. From where can you bear witness to a 5000-year-old civilization? It is precisely these ancient structures, these ancient villages, which are the vessels of this history. If destroyed, then what happens to China’s history? The next generation will never know how the previous generations have lived; where did they go to relieve themselves? How did they cook? Now we have gas stoves, but what did they use then? Where did the pork they ate come from? All of this kind of history will vanish, and that’s why history cannot be severed, we have to protect it, [to] create meaning for the next generation. Thirdly, I am also opposed to relocating all of the villagers and converting [the village] into an architectural museum that is cold and desolate with no one within. To come here would be just to see statues. I’m against this. This is because these historic and cultural relics reflect people’s lives;

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<sup>24</sup> *Qingzhuan baifenqiang* 青砖白粉墙

[they represent] what we know as *xiangchou*, what we know to be ‘rurality.’ When we see women washing clothing in the stream, how they use that mallet to beat [the dirt out]. This seems like a very simple and ordinary thing, but this is part of our *xiangchou* culture. If we move our villagers out, all of this would be gone. And when tourists come, they won’t be able to see this. That’s why for Heyang’s old village, it’s not just a matter of ancient buildings. It also concerns rural culture and village life. How did villagers live before and how do they live now? Before, we fetched our water, now we have running tap water, and no one fetches water anymore. We used to rely on wells, we used to use firewood to cook. That’s why I believe that preservation is more important than tourism development. Tell me, is building a new house easier, or is preserving an old dwelling easier? I think constructing a new house is easy, preserving the old dwelling is difficult. To truly preserve it, and to do it well, is much more challenging than building a new house, and this is especially so for Heyang’s old village. With such a large-scale building complex, it indeed is a task riddled with difficulties. (Group Interview, February 24, 2019, Heyang Village)

From toilet etiquette to laundry, it is precisely within these ‘ordinary’ snapshots of life – past, present, and desired – where ordinary affects reside. And, as Teacher Zhu discerns, it is not just the physical structures that carry ‘value,’ but it is what goes on between and within their walls that represents rural culture and Heyang’s *xiangchou*. What Teacher Zhu calls ‘*xiangchou* culture’ – which can be rife with its own internal contradictions of reminiscing on ‘pastness,’ sustaining continuity, and developing for the future – is where the flows of power and the animate circuits of connections, routes, and disjunctures intersect (Stewart, 2007, p. 3).

Indeed, it was in these narratives of local lives and identities that helped inform, confirm, or completely negate the understandings of not only ‘improvement,’ and ‘development,’ but also of *xiangchou* that I had brought with me from Oxford to Heyang. It is ultimately this theoretical and methodological framework that informed my research as a chameleonic researcher-local, and which also helped mediate the internal dialogue that held between my ethnographic observations, my own subjectivity, and the broader conceptualizations of *xiangchou* in the context of contemporary Chinese society. This project is ultimately a reflexive study of both exotic and endotic ethnography; it is an extended study of *xiangchou* from villager

to Xi Jinping, from Heyang to, arguably, the broader global community. Not to mention, whilst extending from the ‘self’ to the site, *xiangchou* truly is simultaneously personal and – as I now ‘extend back to the heavens’ to discuss the introduction and implications of the Rural Revitalization Strategy – civilizational.

### **3.2. *Jizhu Xiangchou* and Rural Return: A National to Local Campaign**

On October 18, 2017, Xi Jinping delivered a speech that simultaneously shocked and sedated his audience. That is, before the Party’s 200-member central committee and the 2,300 selected delegates meant to represent its 90 million members – a truly symbolic coming together of the party, the state, and society – Xi’s work report for the 19<sup>th</sup> National Congress clocked in at an unprecedented three hours and twenty-three minutes. As even the highest-ranking and most loyal politburo members succumbed silently to the quiet tides of somnolence,<sup>25</sup> Xi’s 30,000-character oeuvre was the ultimate display of his impressive (or excessive) command over the party. Indeed, the 19<sup>th</sup> National Congress was truly momentous. In addition to this speech, it also saw to the official enshrining of “Xi Jinping Thought” into the party’s constitution as well as to the controversial removal of presidential term limits.<sup>26</sup> In brief, it was here where Xi Jinping made clear to the world his position as one of the most powerful Chinese leaders since Deng Xiaoping, and perhaps even since Mao Zedong.

At the same time, although no longer limited in years by the constitution, Xi’s position and legitimacy as China’s Paramount Leader still depended upon his achievements. Moving into his second term, two major tests stood clearly in his path: the party’s “Two Centenaries.”

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<sup>25</sup> Candid photos of former President Jiang Zemin, who appeared to have fallen asleep during the event, spawned many ‘memes’ to epitomize the length of Xi’s speech.

<sup>26</sup> Until then, only the names of Mao and Deng were explicitly included in the constitution’s list of “fundamental doctrines” (see Buckley, 2017).

Since the formation of the party and later the state, two developmental milestones have stood loosely as the CCP's guiding goalposts for the PRC's development. The first was the achievement of a fully "moderately prosperous society," *xiaokangshehui* 小康社会, by the CCP's 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2021; and the second, according to party rhetoric, is to "achieve socialist modernization" and see China fully developed into "a 'great modern socialist country'" by 2049, the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the PRC (Xinhua, 2017). Of course, only time will tell what this "great modern socialist country" will truly resemble if and when realized. In the meantime, however, as 2021 loomed beyond Xi's second term, "moderate prosperity" was the central theme for the 19<sup>th</sup> congress.

In fact, throughout his marathon of a speech, Xi Jinping repeated the term *xiaokangshehui* no less than eighteen times. As Craig A. Smith (2019) observes, "English-language readers of Xi Jinping's speech [...] may have been confused by his repeated emphasis" on the term (p. 66), and indeed, to the uninitiated, the notion of "moderately prosperous" may not sound terribly inspiring; modest, at best. Yet, this nearly 3,000-year-old Confucian concept is "an essential part of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics'" (Smith, 2019, p. 65). The CCP's jargon is often more fluff than substance, however, for Xi, *xiaokangshehui* comes with concrete and quantifiable measures of 'success;' the most crucial goal being the eradication of poverty by 2020.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> According to Wang Lei (2017) from the state media channel, China Global Television Network, poverty in China is defined by the Chinese government "as having an annual income per capital of less than 2,800 yuan (US\$406) in 2015 and 3,000 yuan (US\$435) in 2016."

### 3.2.1. “No One Left Behind:” Introducing the Rural Revitalization Strategy

Almost precisely two years before the above-mentioned speech, Xi was centre stage at another event in Beijing, which was to deliver the keynote address for the 2015 Global Poverty Reduction and Development Forum, held on the eve of the 23<sup>rd</sup> International Day for the Eradication of Poverty (Xi, 2015). Before 300 international representatives, Xi not only stressed China’s commitment to the United Nations’ 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda – which emphasizes the goal of extreme global poverty eradication by 2030 – but he also upped the ante by pledging to the nation and the world to eradicate China’s poverty a decade sooner (Xi, 2015). Poverty reduction (*fupin* 扶贫) became a significant part of Xi’s agenda, and more specifically, much of this attention has since been directed towards the countryside.

During his speech at the international forum, Xi drew from his personal experience of rustication in the 1960s (further discussed in chapter 6, pp. 234-234), where he worked alongside farmers in a small village in Shaanbei. He stressed that for China, much of the war against poverty needs still to be waged in the rural areas (Xi, 2015). The countryside was a focal point of his speech in 2015, which was reflected as well in the above-mentioned work report for the 19<sup>th</sup> National Congress two years later. His stress upon the critical work needing to be done in the countryside was epitomized by the introduction of the ambitious Rural Revitalization Strategy. To be sure, rural development has always featured as a notable task of CCP administrations since the inception of the PRC. However, the unveiling of the Rural Revitalization Strategy during the 19<sup>th</sup> National Congress not only signalled a critical pivot of such work from being a task of “development” to a goal of “revitalization,” but it also elevated and reemphasized this work on the countryside as being a national strategy, and an urgent one as well. In fact, during his work report, the Rural Revitalization Strategy was spoken in the same vein as other national-level strategies, including national defense. It was also listed as the “third

critical” task in Xi’s second term of presidency, where, in his words, he hoped to “deliver on the two centenary goals, realize the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation, and steadily improve our [the] people’s lives” (Xinhua, 2017). The following is clear: the task of poverty alleviation cannot be tackled without consideration of China’s rural areas, and if Xi ultimately hopes to realize the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese people,” there first needs to be the great revitalization of the Chinese countryside.

### 3.2.2. A ‘Trickling Down’ of Discourse; an Intertwining of Xiangchou

For their part, the Jinyun County government began formulating its response to the Rural Revitalization Strategy in the spring to summer transition of 2018. When I conducted fieldwork in the county seat around that same period, I was incredibly fortunate to be able to intern in the Jinyun County Reform and Development Bureau (*fagaiwei* 发改委). Although my role and presence were more akin to an (un)interesting new piece of office furniture, I was nonetheless able to witness what was in this case a very rapid process of policy inception to implementation throughout the months of August to September. As the new ‘intern’ with a ‘specialization in *xiangchou*,’ I was invited to participate in several meetings with directors from the most relevant sectors pertaining to the county’s planning and development of industry.

Even before these meetings took place, however, I was also privy to an informal chat with the director and deputy director of the bureau in July 2018 about a “*xiangchou* plan,” *xiangchoujihua* 乡愁计划, that they had been busy concocting. They knew about my earlier work on Heyang village and my interest in *xiangchou*,<sup>28</sup> and they were also aware of my purpose for returning for further research. They generously extended their support to my research

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<sup>28</sup> Heyang also served as my case study for my master’s thesis, which I completed at the University of Oxford in 2016 as well.

endeavor in the form of their time and their *guanxi* 关系, relations and networks. In return, my identity as both a doctoral candidate from a “prestigious foreign institution” and a polyglot with very *personal* ties to Heyang made for good publicity fodder for the county and the village to be used as needed. In other words, the headline “scholar from Oxford has *xiangchou* for Jinyun” provided some degree of social and cultural capital to the county. This, in and of itself, revealed an interesting collision between various facets and dimensions of *xiangchou*. Firstly, there was an overlap between my academic interests in the concept of *xiangchou* as well as what I understand to be my personal ‘nostalgia,’ ‘homesickness,’ and cultural attachments for my childhood memories of Heyang. Secondly, *xiangchou* served as the lynchpin between me and the officials, who were eager to discuss with me – a supposed ‘scholar of *xiangchou*’ – their proposed plan of ‘*Xiangchou* Industries,’ which, as I now turn to discuss, involved the development of an entire marketplace of and for *xiangchou* in an era of revitalization.

### **3.3. Jinyun’s Race Towards “Xiangchou:” the “Jinyun Model” of Rural Revitalization**

Over tea, I sat with the directors and one other official from the bureau. Given Jinyun’s sweltering summers, which can reach up to 40 degrees Celsius, our meeting took place in the evening and in the air-conditioned tea lounge of Sunny Hotel. Built in 2004, this was one of the first ‘luxury’ hotels in the county. However, with the extension of China’s high-speed railway directly into the county seat and with the overall flourishing of local tourism, Sunny is now overshadowed by not only new luxury stays, but it is also competing against boutique guesthouses that have been tastefully designed to give customers a taste of rurality, but in style. Nevertheless, Sunny remained a favorite for local officials to host their guests.

After exchanging a few pleasantries and after I made clear my intent of using material from this conversation in my doctoral research, to which I received their verbal consent and

approval, they proceeded to ask me the following: as a “Westerner” and also a “person of Heyang,” how do you understand *xiangchou*? Admittedly a bit nervous, I prattled on about how I wrote about *xiangchou* in my master’s thesis, from its connection with Xi Jinping’s speech in 2013, and later, its integration into Heyang’s tourism. They smiled professionally, a sign to me that I was coming off too uptight. I began instead to describe my own Heyang experiences. I spoke fondly of the very blurred but warm sepia-toned memories I had of living in a traditional quadrangle courtyard (*siheyuan* 四合院) in Yanshanxia when I was just shy of two years old; Memories that I could only reconstruct through old photographs and through stories told to me by others (“you ate right on this chicken crate every day; you gave the other children in the *siheyuan* awful haircuts”). The officials nodded; their smiles now seemingly more sincere. They suggested that I must especially miss the food of the hometown while living abroad. I agreed, but also supplemented that there is an abundance of authentic Chinese food in Vancouver, where I call home, and (a decent amount) in Oxford, where I had been living for the past few years. “Surely, your parents must cook you Jinyun-dishes?” they asked. I agreed again, and explained how, to this day, my parents still carry noodles and *meigancai* 梅干菜 (preserved mustard leaves), back from Jinyun to Vancouver in their suitcases. To this they responded, “see, you are *dididaodao* 地地道道 [an out-and-out] person of Jinyun, not a *laowai* 老外 [foreigner].” To be sure, I have never claimed to be a *laowai*. However, I consider Vancouver, where I have undergone most of my socialization, more as my ‘hometown’ than Jinyun, where I am mostly attached to by ancestry, some fond memories, and now, my research. I am legally Canadian, physiologically “Chinese,” however, as far as the officials were concerned, I was culturally and inescapably “from Jinyun.” The way through which my tastebuds and memories were shaped by my childhood associations to Jinyun – my *xiaoshihoudeweidao* 小时候的味道, “flavors of

my childhood” – engrained within me a *xiangchou* for Jinyun that, according to their logic, shaped my sense of identity as *belonging* to this place (for the phenomenon of “Culinary Nostalgia,” see Swislocki, 2008; Bram, 2020).

### 3.3.1. The Creation of “Xiangchou Industries”

This was their way of segueing into the meat of what they wanted to speak of: *xiangchou*, and, more specifically, the local delicacies of *jinyunshaobing* 缙云烧饼 and *shuangmian* 爽面, the former, a pancake stuffed with pork and *meigancai*, and the latter, thin hand-pulled and pre-salted noodles, the same noodles I had become most acquainted with through my parents’ suitcases. As the most well-known *tutechan* 土特产, local rural specialties, these savory delicacies are considered cultural icons of Jinyun. They are not only key drivers of the local economy – both in terms of domestic exports and local production and consumption – but they are also critical to the construction and propagation of local culture. Just to further emphasize their importance, there are even independent “*shaobing*” and “Noodle” departments within the Reform and Development Bureau, referred to in Mandarin as *shaobingban* 烧饼办 and *shuangmianban* 爽面办, respectively. Each staffed with their own directors, team members, and sizable budgets procured from the prefectural city of Lishui, they are essentially of the same rank as other departments within the bureau. The head of ‘pancakes’ and the head of ‘noodles’ would sit beside the head of agriculture and the head of human resources at a bureau-wide meeting, for instance. Answering his own question now, the director said: “I will tell you what *xiangchou* is. *Xiangchou* is the *shaobing*. *Xiangchou* is also the noodles. But more importantly, the *shaobing* and the noodles are very profitable ‘*xiangchou* industries,’ *xiangchouchanye* 乡愁产业” (Fieldwork, July 16, 2018, Jinyun County Seat).

A few weeks later, a five-year development plan had been drafted by representatives of the Reform and Development Bureau, and it went by the name of: “Jinyun’s *Xiangchou* Industries to Enrich the People,” *Jinyunxiangchoufuminchanye* 缙云乡愁富民产业. The plan went through several revisions, but the keyword and the concept that remained in each iteration was “Xiangchou Industries;” No matter what ‘industry’ ultimately made it into the final version of the plan, *xiangchou* had to be conveyed as the key selling point of Jinyun. In this sense, Jinyun’s main industry is Xiangchou with a capital ‘X:’ this was a *xiangchou* that transcended affect, this was a definitive materialization of Xiangchou as an entire industry. In fact, it was even expressed to me on several occasions that the bureau wanted Jinyun County to “be the first to claim the term ‘Xiangchou Industries’.” One official even took out his mobile phone part way through a meeting with all department heads just to confirm that there indeed had not yet been a *Baidu* entry for the term “Xiangchou Industries.” The cadres also expressed that their ultimate goal was to earn a mention during the 20<sup>th</sup> National Congress and hoped to be praised by Xi Jinping as an exemplary “rural revitalization success story.” As told to me by the director during our above-mentioned tea-time conversation:

Just as Chongqing has its ‘Chongqing model’ of development,<sup>29</sup> we hope Xi Jinping will present our ‘Xiangchou Industries’ as the ‘Jinyun model’ for rural revitalization, but also for rural development overall. We hope for ‘Xiangchou Industries’ to be a model known to have stemmed from our humble little county, but also to be a model replicable by other counties and their constituent villages, where they can use their own versions of *xiangchou* for revitalization. (Fieldwork, July 16, 2018, Jinyun County Seat)

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<sup>29</sup> The “Chongqing model” was a series of social and economic policies designed and implemented in the city of Chongqing in the mid-2000s to early 2010s. It is mostly associated the leadership of the now-controversial figure, Bo Xilai (see Zhao, 2012). According to Kevin Lu (2012), Bo’s vision for Chongqing’s development was distinct enough from mainstream Party politics to warrant its status of its own ‘model’ as it “appear[ed] to have found a third way” between the party’s debate between an export-led versus consumption-based model of development. Meanwhile, according to Yuezhi Zhao (2012), the ‘Chongqing model’ distinguished itself from the Party by way of its ideology, as it “was characterized as looking to revitalize socialist ideas and populist claims in its push for rapid and balanced growth” (para. 2).

Here, Jinyun's *xiangchou* is concrete and specific, and it is represented, for instance, by the *shaobing* and the noodles, things that are 'local' and supposedly embody and communicate the characteristics of the place and its embedded culture, history, and traditions. *Xiangchou* used in this context is given a specific meaning; it belongs to Jinyun. Moreover, returning to the entire name of the plan, when paired with the concepts of "industries" and "enrich the people," a further layer of meaning is added to this invocation of *xiangchou*. *Xiangchou* must not only become commodifiable and tradeable in the marketplace, but it must also serve the purpose of bringing income to the people and improving their standard of living. Seeped in the context of "rural revitalization," the otherwise abstract idea of "Xiangchou Industries" is brought further into focus. It is a developmental and economic strategy for building the County and its constituent township and villages, wherein products and services deemed to represent Jinyun are key to the growth and flourishing of local industries and the reduction of hardship and poverty. To be sure, branding and promoting 'local specialties,' *tutechan* 土特产, (which I further discuss in chapter 5, pp. 197-198), has been a key place-building strategy across many rural and non-rural localities. Food cultures, for example, have been especially useful in not only sustaining local economies, but also in identifying and solidifying local cultures and collective identities built through place and time. David Goodman (2002) has discussed the importance of "Shanxi distinctiveness" in this Northern Chinese region's province and identity building processes in the 1990s, and he illustrates the complexities involved in the creation of a "Shanxi provincial identity" through *tutechan*, local specialties, especially vis-à-vis the political identities involved in both localism and nationalism.

Therefore, when stripped away of party jargon and ideology, the plan of "Xiangchou Industries to Enrich the People" is neither novel nor ground-breaking. Fundamentally, it is

another form of place and identity building through the emphasis of local ‘distinctiveness.’ It is a means of increasing state support and resources into the production and provision of local specialty goods and services. However, what makes “Xiangchou Industries” noteworthy, firstly, is the county’s ambitions to make it a *national model* for revitalization; a model that, if acknowledged by the central government, can not only put Jinyun on the map, but, theoretically, enable other rural regions to become self-sufficient by adopting the “Jinyun model” of rural revitalization and adapting it to their own unique *xiangchou*. Secondly it is the usage of an *emotion* as the means and model for rural revival that, I argue, places emphasis on not only building industry, but, more importantly, it encourages the *return* of industry as well as the labor and capital to build and sustain it. At the end of the day, *xiangchou* is an expression that embodies the elements of “nostalgia” and “homesickness,” and in this sense, it is an affective page awaiting to be filled by the things, places, times, smells, and even tastes that become targets for desire. *Xiangchou* – at once effective in its usage and affective in its meaning – encourages and mobilizes various forms of rural return as it embodies both Marx’s (1852) conception of the “dull compulsions of economic relations” and a form of affective devotion to personal and cultural attachments.

### **3.3.2. (Re)branding Xiangchou for “Thriving Industries”**

Despite the ambitions and excitement of the incumbent cadres that conceived of the ‘Xiangchou Industries’ plan, what is worth noting is that Jinyun had already adopted *xiangchou* before 2017. In fact, the ‘Xiangchou Industries’ plan was a continuation of an existing concept that was launched around 2016 and under another Party Secretary, known as Jinyun’s “Ten Great

Xiangchou Industries,” *jinyunshidaxiangchouchanye* 缙云十大乡愁产业.<sup>30</sup> As its name indicates, the plan identified ten local products and services that were deemed to, on the one hand, represent “authentic Jinyun flavour” and “traditional rural culture;” and, on the other hand, they had to be products capable of invoking in the consumer a sense of “nostalgia for the countryside.” As I was told by county officials, this plan was produced because of the momentum spurred on by a former party secretary of the County, Zhu Jikun, who, inspired by Xi Jinping’s usage of *xiangchou* in his speech for the 2013 Central Urbanization Work Conference, published the essay “On Rural Tourism,” *Tanxiangcunlvyou* 谈乡村旅游, in 2015. Immediately after publication, Zhu Jikun’s essay became the inspiration for several developmental policies across the county, especially for villages like Heyang that promoted rural tourism. As I discussed in earlier research (Qian, 2017, pp. 4431-4432), Zhu’s writing set the theoretical foundations and charted the direction for Jinyun’s development, and it was built upon the ‘mobilization of *xiangchou*.’

According to an official press release announced on the official Zhejiang Provincial news site in 2016, this earlier conception of “Xiangchou Industries” was to be the growth engine for creating and developing across Jinyun sites to pilot the concept of “*Xiangchou* Tourism,” *xiangchoulvyouxianxingqu* 乡愁旅游先行区, a plan spearheaded by Zhu Jikun, but, as I learnt from the current County party secretary, was scrapped by the director who replaced Zhu. More importantly, however, the official press release also stated that the “ten great industries” were incorporated into the 2016 list of “rural livelihood essentials” and were critical to the development of grassroots entrepreneurship (Zhejiang News, 2016). In fact, the document’s title

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<sup>30</sup> In fact, according to some sources, the exact term of “*xiangchou fuminchanye*” was already in use in the 2016 iteration of the plan.

and final line asserted that Jinyun must “return to zero and turn a new page,” and that all effort from state and society must be put into “developing a *xiangchou*-centric ecological economy, harmoniously push for the development of the *xiangchou* industries, collaboratively revitalize the rural economy, and truly let even more ‘*xiangchou*’ flourish on the ground” (Zhejiang News, 2016, para. 6). To be sure, much of this language is a common way for lower levels of governance to pay service to the Party’s rhetoric as well as a display of ‘benevolent governance.’ Still, *xiangchou* is an abstract sociocultural and even psychological concept, so in terms of the actual livelihood of rural residents, what does it truly mean for *xiangchou* to ‘flourish on the ground?’

In more concrete terms, the “Ten Great Xiangchou Industries” plan was a way for Jinyun county to procure funding from higher levels of governance and to funnel the money and resources into select industries that are critical to local development because of their claimed ‘ability to invoke *xiangchou*.’ Industries listed in the plan included: the “yellow-white-red-grey-black” agricultural products, collectively known as the *wucainongye* 五彩农业 (penta-colored agricultural goods);<sup>31</sup> *minsu* 民宿 (rural guesthouses), the Jinyun *shaobing*, the Jinyun noodles, and, of course, rural tourism. At the time, the *shaobing* and noodle businesses were considered the most profitable. In fact, it was in 2016 when both their respective departments were established in the county Reform and Development Bureau. Through the *shaobing* department alone, some 15 million yuan (about US\$2.2 million) was invested into various projects to boost the industry as well as grow the “Jinyun *shaobing*” brand, both nationally and internationally. This included the provision of free *shaobing*-masterclasses, which allegedly produced 9,800

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<sup>31</sup> “Penta-colored” derives from the colors of five agricultural products that are considered native and culturally significant to Jinyun. This includes yellow tea, white bamboo shoots, purple yams, the *meigancai* (which is black in color), and, finally, the brown-feathered shelduck and their eggs.

new “*shaobing* masters,” 35 of whom were crowned the title of “grand master.” As of 2017, these masters collectively opened 5,000 new *shaobing* businesses nation and worldwide, and 311 storefronts directly received 5.22 million yuan (about US\$786,700) in government assistance.

As I gathered from interviews, publicly available news articles, as well as other government documents I had access to that praised these initiatives, most of the new *shaobing* masters were Jinyun locals who had *meishigan* 没事干 – that is, ‘nothing to do.’ Discussed at length in Chapter 4, the idleness embodied in the term *meishigan* was less a reflection of a negative personality trait, and more attributable to several external factors such as a lack of industry in rural parts of Jinyun, challenges in finding work elsewhere, as well as the trappings that come with being “left behind” – whether that meant being left behind to hold down the fort as their family members out-migrated to make an income, or whether that meant being an entire village or community that has been left behind in the nations’ march towards an “urban modernity” (see Xiang, 2007 for a study on the ‘left-behinds’). In this sense, individuals were afforded the opportunity and training to take *xiangchou* industries into their own hands (and to literally make some dough). Through the humble *shaobing*, select residents in Jinyun were empowered with a new revenue stream, and it was the help of the county that enabled these formerly idle rural residents to attain a *new rural subjectivity* as a rural entrepreneur. And, as entrepreneurs, they contributed directly to the materialization and growth of the “Industry of Xiangchou.”

Although the rise of *shaobing* masters certainly seems to be a positive outcome of direct government intervention, what is ironic, however, is the fact that the vast majority of these entrepreneurs were not based in Jinyun. Rather, they were scattered across the country and

further abroad. In other words, this industry may have been thriving, but it did not necessarily help locals thrive at home. Indeed, without denying the appeal of *shaobing* to locals as a delightful snack, the idea of having thousands of new *shaobing* masters stationed directly in their local home villages is akin to having tourist memorabilia stationed at every neighbourhood block in a small town. Put differently, it is not locals who need to be sold on the Jinyun brand; it is not locals who are necessarily desiring to consume a ‘*xiangchou*’ that is supposedly their own – in fact, is this even their *xiangchou*? There may have been more locals who mastered the art of *shaobing*, but they still needed to leave their homes in order to translate their skills into livelihood. This issue of having locally operating industries and locally available sources of employment is discussed at length in Chapter 4, where, at the time of this writing, the dilemma of needing to create *in-situ* industries remained unresolved.

### 3.3. Conclusion

Although mass rural out-migration was once considered integral and a natural process to China’s growth, it is now a significant challenge and *burden* needing to be overcome. Echoing a central tenet of the Rural Revitalization Strategy, which is to create “Thriving Industries” within rural economies, the ‘Xiangchou Industries’ plan, therefore, was meant to encourage rural return by offering remaining locals, and especially those who had left, the opportunity to live and work at home. Of course, as the *shaobing* example illustrates, this was not necessarily the case. Moreover, not all are afforded equal access to opportunities for return, revealing the multiple layers of competing interests, developmental goals and targets, and even new divisions and disparities between rural citizens. From Xi Jinping, to the Bureau director, and to local residents, the power of language and discourse as it is constantly reappropriated by lower ranking officials is made especially clear, illustrating how these words can and indeed do impact

on residents, contingent upon, of course, their own individual circumstances and (evolving) subjectivities.

Moreover, at a glance, while it would seem that the 2018 version of the “Xiangchou Industries” plan was merely an exercise in rebranding – the fact that the plan itself was essentially unchanged in its proposed goals and even in its methods of execution from its previous iteration in 2016 demonstrates the power of discourse in the politics and mechanisms involved in the complex minefield that is project bidding (*touxiangmu* 投项目) and public procurement. Although project bidding and public procurement are beyond the scope of this project, it is worth mentioning that the presentation of the new plan was also a way through which funds could be reallocated and redistributed based on what was perceived to be shifting priorities at the higher levels of governance, from the township and county all the way up to the centre. Moreover, even though the new plan in 2018 was a repackaged version of an existing plan, resources were redistributed amongst industries and the language was tailored to speak more directly to the mission of the Rural Revitalization Strategy almost immediately following the 19<sup>th</sup> National Congress and its elaboration in the central government’s No. 1 Document in 2018. In other words, the Rural Revitalization Strategy provided the language and a *national* scope for *xiangchou*’s utility and mobilization in Jinyun. At both the national and local levels, the invocation of *xiangchou* is the mobilization of people’s affective landscapes of ‘nostalgia,’ ‘homesickness,’ and genuine concerns for the literal or proverbial home-village. *Xiangchou* is an articulation of desire for return as well as a developmental strategy that necessarily involves *mobilizing rural return* to places like Heyang.

#### Chapter 4. Embedded Migration, Innate Xiangchou

Despite efforts put into building Heyang's tourism industry since the early 2000's, for years, the imagery of a 'hollowed-out' village still rung eerily true within the ancient heritage dwellings site, the *guminju* 古民居. As I recall from my earlier visits to Heyang between 2009-2014, life in the *guminju* was scant, and particularly so at nighttime when only the wind could be heard as it billowed from one empty room to the next, greeting darkness and the occasional elder, deep in slumber. By day, a blanket of 'greyness' could be both seen and felt. Enclosed within the ancient stone slabs of the heritage dwellings, even the passing of time seemed to be swallowed by the sedate routine of the village's seniors; a careful quotidian portioning of 5am breakfasts, 11am lunches, and 5pm suppers. Periodically interspersed between mealtimes, however, were the comings and goings of tour groups, construction workers, visiting cadres, and the occasional media crew, seeking to capture and document *xiangchou*, the imagery of a 'nostalgic' rural idyll. The presence of these strangers to Heyang became more frequent over the years, growing in tandem with the increasingly domineering presence of the 'Xiangchou Tourism' industry.

Meanwhile, outside of the immediate tourism orbit, life in the 'new village' carried on with its own routine that was made discernable by the sounds of dilapidated wagons and the palpable scent of traffic that led into the bustling township of Xinjian and further afar. By the evening, the controlled chaos of locomotives was replaced by the stiff sound of *mahjong* tiles shuffled against one another by the hands of local men and women who had once left the village just so they could earn enough money to eventually return. Shrouded in a thick cloud of cigarette smoke, they gambled cash that was likely to have been accumulated through years of hardship, exchanging as much village gossip as they did money, sharing whispers about those who had

fallen into debt. The skilled swapping of *mahjong* tiles throughout mundane evenings mirrored the sporadic comings and goings of migrants throughout the year. They were duck breeders and shrimp farmers who trickled back in here and there; some returned with much fanfare to celebrate their earnings, meanwhile, others slid back in quietly with debts to their name after another year of fruitless labor.

#### 4.1. Introduction

This chapter is about the historical, social, and cultural embeddedness of migration and the landscape of work and employment in Heyang. Since the beginning of the reform and opening up era, Heyang residents' primary source of income has been the remittances and other 'return' flows that accompanied its army of labor migrants, consisting predominantly of villagers who left to breed ducks or farm shrimp in other rural or peri-urban parts of China. So embedded is this practice of out-migration within the livelihood practices of families across Xinjian township, that there is what some scholars call a strong "culture of migration." A "culture of migration," explains Jeffrey H. Cohen (2004), is "a system in which migration is integrated and integral to ongoing sociocultural development" (p. 29). In Heyang, this culture revolves around these livestock and aquaculture industries. In Cohen's and Ibrahim Sirkeci's (2011) elaboration upon the term, they write,

the choice to migrate is not driven by economic need alone, nor is a desire to leave a natal home sufficient to promote border crossing. It is culture — in other words, the social practice, meaning, and symbolic logic of mobility — that must be understood along with economics if we are to understand patterns of migration. (p. 20)

Likewise, in her monograph, *How Migrant Labor is Changing Rural China*, Rachel Murphy (2002) also discusses this concept in the context of post-Mao China, and she argues, "migration

strategies are not simply opportunistic and immediate responses to push and pull stimuli; they are also the products of *values and goals* [emphasis added] inculcated through longer-term socialization and life experiences” (p. 21). As she further details, migration in some societies even becomes an “endorsed and expected means of attaining economic goals and a rite of passage for young people” (Murphy, 2002, p. 21), which again emphasizes the *cultural* aspect of and considerations behind both individual and collective understandings of migration and its socioeconomic value. In other words, why do people migrate, and why is migration important to the village? Understanding this culture of migration is integral to understanding Heyang village and its landscapes of labor, income, and employment, not to mention the fact that the migrant subjectivity is inherently underwritten by homesickness, nostalgia, and a perpetual sense of concern for their home-village and those left behind within it. Indeed, migration engenders *xiangchou*, and migrants are the carriers of much *chou* for their *xiang*.

The first section of this chapter uses anecdotal and archival data collected from Heyang to present an economic history of the region from the vantage point of residents’ livelihood strategies. It introduces why such a culture of migration has formed, and, in particular, how it formed around the industry of duck breeding since the onset of China’s reform and opening up in 1978, later incorporating shrimp farming throughout the 2000s. I illustrate how a cycle of out-migration and return has been central to the economic survival of those who originate from Heyang, which, aside from the introduction of tourism in the early 2000s, has otherwise lacked any local form of industry or productive capabilities. Since the mid 2010’s, however, a variety of factors – including increased market competition and new environmental regulations – have put the sustainability and practicality of these tried-and-true practices of outmigration into question. The second part of this chapter therefore explores whether the ‘Xiangchou Tourism’

industry can provide an alternative source of work and income for residents who are reconsidering out-migration as their primary household livelihood strategy. It homes in on the stories of five Heyang residents who were employed in the tourism site as ticket collectors, a security guard, and tour guides. Among the five, four were former migrants who returned to Heyang for various reasons from their respective stints in duck breeding and shrimp farming. Through their contemplations about their experiences working in the tourist site as well as their stories of return, this chapter probes the following: can 'Xiangchou Tourism' be a thriving industry in Heyang, and if so, can it be an industry that helps the people of Heyang thrive while living locally?

#### **4.2. A Barren Nest: Heyang's History of Migration**

As observed by Timothy Oakes and Louisa Schein (2006), "[t]he most obvious and most commented upon element of spatial change in today's China has been the unprecedented geographic mobility of millions of labor migrants, tourists, brides, entrepreneurs, and many others" (p. 1). While tourists may be the most visible presence of geographic mobility *in* Heyang, the most dominant form of mobility *from* and *returning to* Heyang is that of labor migrants. In fact, the pervasiveness of migration in Heyang is rendered most visible by the absence of workers in the village and their sporadic returns throughout the year. Largely due to a lack of industry and income within the village itself, they are compelled to leave their homes in search for work elsewhere in the country. Meanwhile, the village's economy has relied largely on the remittances and various return flows of resources that accompany this outmigration. Of course, this situation is not at all unique to Heyang, and the issue of rural to urban labor migration in contemporary China has already been widely discussed and subject to countless studies from

an array of perspectives.<sup>32</sup> Accordingly, similar to the numerous other sending/source communities within not only China, but across the world, Heyang is yet another case that exhibits the strategic importance of migration in terms of household livelihood strategies. It also illustrates the cultural importance of migration in terms of its embeddedness in the social networks, tangible and intangible resources, as well as the historic fabric and sociocultural continuities of a given community, including the (re)produced identities of ‘citizens’ of said community.

Within Heyang and across the Xinjian Township, a strong culture of migration prevails manifest in cyclical and intermittent patterns of labor out-migration and return (for diverse patterns of migration outflows and returns, see for instance Hare, 1999; Murphy, 2002, pp. 25-27; and Bai, Wang, & Zhang, 2018).<sup>33</sup> There is even a central node that exists in the heart of Heyang’s culture of migration. Shaped like a duck, its pull is strong enough that, to this day, almost all facets of life in Heyang continue to revolve around its orbit. Specifically, Heyang’s culture of migration is characterized by the fact that a significant majority of migrants leave from the village not to join China’s massive army of migrant labors in the service or manufacturing sectors. Rather, they move to other rural and periurban parts of the country where they engage in various forms of agri- and aquaculture. It was the business of duck breeding – in particular, a local breed of shelduck known as the *Jinyun maya* 缙云麻鸭 – that planted the first seeds for this culture of migration to grow. The current embeddedness of migration that persists in Heyang in the 2010s is an enduring legacy of duck breeding that began during the Mao-era.

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<sup>32</sup> Although by no means an exhaustive list, some of the most cited and prolific scholars on the subject of rural labor migration and its impacts include Rachel Murphy, Pun Ngai, Tamara Jacka, Wanning Sun, Jenny Chan, Xiang Biao, and Yaohui Zhao.

<sup>33</sup> To be sure, many households also practice long-term migration and permanent resettlement outside of the village. However, I focus on temporary migration because it has been historically the most impactful upon the village itself.

At the time of this writing, this form of migration was still being practiced, and predominantly by those born before the 1990s. The absence of those of the post-90's and post-00's generations from the village is better explained by the resettlement of their parents to other parts of China or their own migration for the pursuits of higher education, white collar careers, and gigs in the digital and sharing economy.<sup>34</sup> In acknowledging that there are generational differences in how out-migration is viewed and practiced, I acknowledge that this culture of migration is not static – as a 'culture,' it is constantly adapting and adjusting to the environment, which is understood in the broadest sense to encompass the sociocultural, political economic, industrial, and ecological landscape of Heyang. Whether or not this culture is at a point of transition is crucial to the observance of a potential turning point in China's overall developmental path. Before discussing and assessing changing perceptions on migration both in Heyang and in China more broadly, it is first instructive to explore the historical context through which this culture of migration was formed in the region to better understand not only the issue of employment in present day Heyang, but also to glean more insight into the context that led to the eventual establishment and development of Heyang's tourism industry. Understanding the formation of this culture of migration surrounding the shelduck business also illuminates how changes at the village level and the level of the individual are reifications of the CCP's shifting ideologies. Indeed, they are local adaptations and personal strategies made in response to changes at the national level of development.

#### **4.2.1. Duck Tales from Xinjian: A Personal Account of Migration**

Not a day goes by without the mentioning or sighting of ducks in Heyang. During my

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<sup>34</sup> The migrants discussed in this chapter are predominantly those born before the 1990s. Heyang's post-90s and 00's generations are discussed in chapter 6 and more at length in the concluding chapter.

fieldwork, ducks would also be a point of discussion in every group interview or individual interview, whether prompted or not, and it came up most frequently whenever there was mention of migration, income or employment, or the whereabouts of neighbors or other family members. Through conversations with interlocuters, I learnt that the practice of *going out* to breed ducks began locally even before Mao-era restrictions on mobility were lifted. During the collective era, economic opportunities in the countryside were more or less limited to agriculture, with earnings limited within one's production brigade (*shengchandu* 生产队). Any side-enterprise (*fuye* 副业) required the special permission of brigade captains, and a certain percentage of profits earned were to be contributed back to the brigade. In a group interview conducted within the *guminju*, interviewees, Zhu Weizhong, Zhu Jinhan, and Zhu Weihu – three farmers in their late fifties and sixties who had all returned and resettled in Heyang after years of duck breeding – spoke about their lives during the collective era. They explained how, because of the economic restrictions in place, a few shrewd and enterprising individuals decided to risk leaving the production brigade to try their hand at breeding shelduck. Although fieldwork afforded me much access to the rich history of this industry within the region, I did not need to wander far to learn about its true origins. In fact, all it took was going home to my roots in Vancouver, Canada to retrieve the missing cornerstone, the wellspring of this duck tale.

Over a few beers, my father and I spent an evening taking in the recent loss of my uncle and grandfather, his older brother and father. The evening was uncharacteristically warm for Vancouver in March, and, perhaps partly due to the overall strangeness of the year 2020 and the coronavirus pandemic that had made its way over to North America, my father was uncharacteristically emotional and verbose. Usually the one doing most of the speaking, that evening, I sat quietly and listened to him reminisce on his childhood and experiences growing

up in Xinjian.

Born in 1957, my father came into a China that was struck by famine. “We all ate much bitterness,” he said, using the term *chiku* 吃苦, a common expression that means to suffer through hardship and is frequently associated with this period in contemporary Chinese history (for “speaking bitterness” and “eating bitterness” among China’s peasantry in the collective era, see for instance Manning & Wemheuer, 2010; Branigan, 2013; and Swislocki, 2008, p. 5). “I even ate tree barks,” he recalled, taking a swig of beer, as if to wash the taste away. “Every day was bitter, but one of the worst times was when we tried to go to Fujian, we were trying to make money off of breeding ducks.” It dawned on me that my father was describing what he alleged was the second Mao-era duck-breeding journey ever to have left Xinjian. The very first, according to him, was completed by another man from Xinjian. “His name was Da Kui, he was from No. 2 village.<sup>35</sup> He did it himself, he made 500-600 yuan [US\$73-88] in the first year.<sup>36</sup> Da Kui was the *yuanlao* 元老 [originator], our family was the second” (Interview, May 13, 2020, Vancouver, Canada).

My father used the term *buwuzhengye* 不务正业 to describe how my grandfather took no interest in the agricultural work assigned in the production brigade. This is a term that suggests how one does not do ‘proper’ work. While this behavior could rightfully be characterized as ‘irresponsible’ or ‘lazy,’ one could also make the leap to interpret his evasion of ‘proper’ work as a reflection of the broader stagnation in production and income during this time; stagnation that Huang, Otsuka, and Rozelle (2008), argue was caused by the undermining of incentives in agriculture by the socialist organization of production. Therefore, when my

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<sup>35</sup> In the collective era, what is currently the township of Xinjian was divided into six villages. Labeled from No. 1 village (*yicun* 一村) to No. 6, each was responsible to its own production brigade.

<sup>36</sup> Currency converted based on the 1960s, taking into account present-day inflation rates.

grandfather heard about Da Kui and the fortune he made from duck breeding, he immediately saw this as an alternative means to provide for the family. Leaving my grandmother at home to continue working in the brigade, he took his two sons, my father and late uncle, on what would be a tumultuous journey of 500km by foot. Before leaving, they sought permission from their brigade and pieced together some money from neighbours to procure duck eggs from the brooder house in the adjacent No. 1 village. Once the ducks were able to walk and forage for their own food, the three began their long march. They walked for several months, timing their journey with the growth of the ducks as well as the rice harvesting schedules of Zhejiang, Jiangxi, and eventually, Fujian.

From Jinyun, we began herding these ducks... One person led the way, he herded 20-30 ducks in the front, knowing that the hundreds or so others would be running obediently behind. I was the youngest. I carried all our supplies. This was all done on foot. We walked every day this way until it was too dark to see. At night, we looked for an area dry enough to set up camp. We cordoned off the ducks, and the three of us humans slept nearby. We always tried to find a small temple. A temple would be a five-star hotel for us. (Interview, May 13, 2020, Vancouver, Canada)

They carried a bag of rice, a single brass pot, and a supply of *meigancai* 梅干菜 [dried mustard leaves]. This was the same *meigancai* that once served as villagers' only source of fuel and flavor in the 1950s, to become officially designated as a "Xiangchou Industry to Enrich the People" by the County in 2015 (see chapter 3, p. 112).

By the time they reached Jiangxi, my father fell ill. He remained more or less unconscious for the rest of the journey. "Your grandfather thought I was already dead," he said, "he took me to a hospital, in case there was still some signs of life. They injected me with a shot of something and I immediately came to." Upon leaving the hospital, my father recalled being treated by my grandfather to a bowl of wontons, after which, the three continued to Fujian with

their ducks in tow. When they finally reached Fujian, exhausted, but elated, they thought they had finally made it. “The ducks were almost about to lay eggs. I remember clearly, we had 220 of them.” Had things gone to plan, they would have remained in Fujian, where duck eggs sold for a higher price than in Zhejiang. Eventually, they would sell the ducks as well and return to Xinjian with this profit, with a portion of it contributed back to their brigade, of course.

As fate would have it, however, a change in policy at the national level led to the confiscation of their entire flock. “They told us that this is was a private venture, which was not allowed. They said capitalism was illegal, so the state took away all of our ducks. Your grandfather cried.”<sup>37</sup> My father was around ten years old at the time, and we deduced that this must have been around the start of the Cultural Revolution, a time when the Mao-era state was even more hostile towards private enterprises (Wei, 1999, p. 198). Fortunately, my grandfather was able to produce documents proving his status as a veteran – a title that held a certain degree of respect and privilege – and he was able to retrieve their flock. Unfortunately, because their flock was mixed with all the other confiscated livestock, their ducks contracted a disease that ended up wiping out almost half of the 220. To salvage the other half, the trio traded their rice for veterinary drugs. In the end, they only broke even. My father was the first to return to Xinjian, and he was greeted by his grandfather who burst immediately into tears at the sight of his grandson. At this point of the story, my father too began to tear up, “I don’t want to continue anymore,” he paused, this time, trading his beer for a shot of *baijiu* 白酒, strong Chinese spirit. “Everyone thought I was already dead.”

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<sup>37</sup> Capitalism was considered “illegal” even before the three left the village, however, according to my father, there was a certain degree of leeway afforded to them by the production brigade, because, in order to survive, the brigade also needed the extra money they could receive from the profits made through individual side enterprises. This is supported by Yehua Wei’s (1999) observations in Wenzhou, and how he explains that “the underground capitalist economy was never totally eliminated” (p. 198; p. 202).

Although they did not make the bounty they had hoped for, news of the trio's eventual return did end up spreading quickly but quietly across Xinjian, inspiring several other households to attempt the same. Soon, word of duck breeding also reached neighbouring villages, and to the ears of young farmers like Weizhong in Heyang. By then, it was rumored that several people over in Xinjian managed to make 800 yuan (US\$118) in one year. Compared to the daily maximum of 0.40-0.50 yuan (US\$0.06-0.07) they received toiling fields within the production brigade, this was an astronomical figure that could not be ignored. "Do you know what 800 yuan meant back then? Everyone had their eyes on the fortunes that people managed to bring back. This was proof that there was a path out of hunger" (Interview, May 13, 2020, Vancouver, Canada).

#### **4.2.2. Pride and Origins: Establishing the Culture of Migration**

The elderly men from the group interview informed me that although the ducks are a breed native to Jinyun, their breeding must be done elsewhere because there is not enough space and land to build any duck farms locally, especially not in the natural village of Heyang. This remains the case in the present-day, even after the amalgamation process with Yanshanxia. Therefore, as with my father's experience, a lack of transportation infrastructure and few funds meant that duck breeding during the Mao-era involved herding young ducklings by foot to far-away cities, where they would sell eggs and later their flock with the intention of returning back home on foot with their earnings. During these journeys, a myriad of difficulties and restrictions would be encountered, including disease, severe weather patterns, and physical, emotional, and mental strain. Not to mention, there was also the need to adapt to ever-changing policies and directives during what was an incredibly politically and ideologically chaotic era, as well as the need to negotiate with various state agents in overt and covert ways to even carry out a side-

enterprise at all. According to Weizhong, who left Heyang two years prior to the reform, there was so much risk involved with this endeavor. In his words:

In 1976, the year Chairman Mao died, I was in Jiangxi. I had already gone out. Back then, if you were caught, you would be charged criminally for speculation and profiteering. We had struggle sessions back then too, so we had to be very careful. But I made a couple hundred in a year, and I was so happy. (Group Interview, February 22, 2019, Heyang Village)

At the time, this was truly a high risk but high reward venture, although it did not pay off for all. However, because of their early start in this form of business, people from the entire county had a competitive advantage in the industry of duck breeding when migration was reinstated in 1978. An excerpt from the group interview provides more detail on the flourishing of not only the local network for duck breeding, but also the role locals played in the development of industry nationwide:

Weizhong: All across the country, everyone who was breeding ducks was from our Jinyun. Especially back then, there were very few coming from other [parts of China].

Jinhan: When aquaculture and livestock breeding started taking off [in China], most people who were involved in it were from our county, they *went out* from here.

Weihsu: 80% were all people of Jinyun, and many were us *heyang ren* [people of Heyang].

Weizhong: It was our people who spearheaded the development and maturation of these industries. We took others under our wings and tutelage. We were the earliest. (Group Interview, February 22, 2019, Heyang Village)

A degree of pride can be detected from this brief exchange, as the three farmers continuously emphasized the pioneering role that locals played in the proliferation of duck breeding across the country – with the term ‘local’ extended to encompass all of Jinyun county.

Whether or not this local footprint within the national duck breeding industry is as large as the three make it out to be is to be taken with a grain of salt. However, according to one of the latest editions of the Heyang Zhu clan genealogy, out-migrating for duck breeding did become a significant source of income for the village as a whole. As alluded to above, the start of the reform era that began under Deng Xiaoping in 1978 saw the loosening of the state's iron-grip on mobility as well as the gradual restructuring of rural economies (see for instance Nolan, 1993). Across the country, these reforms opened a floodgate for out-migration. In the words of Pun Ngai and Huilin Lu (2010), the reform gave “the freedom to move, which led to the freedom to work for foreign or privately-owned enterprises and the freedom to leave one's hometown” (p. 501). As Pun and Lu (2010) also observed, the reform unleashed for many a desire for self-transformation, and “in attempting to make this desire a reality, many of these people had to sell their labor to factory owners” (pp. 501-502). In the case of Heyang, however, most left not to sell their labor as peasant migrant workers, (*nongmingong* 农民工), but worked instead as self-employed households (*getihu* 个体户) to sell ducks and duck eggs. In fact, during that period, 1,300 of the village's 3,000 residents left to pursue duck breeding (Yiyang Zhu Family Genealogy Committee, 1995, pp. 218-220). This phenomenon was even poetically described in the Heyang Zhu clan genealogy book in the following manner: “the duck breeding industry sprung up like bamboo sprouts after a spring rain, as duck breeders rushed out of Zhejiang and spread all over the country” (Yiyang Zhu Family Genealogy Committee, 1995, p. 220). Weizhong, who was 18 in 1978, was among this wave of migrants, and this time, he was able to *go out* openly and no longer in fear of being caught.

On the whole, those who went out from Heyang in the early reform years enjoyed a relatively high success rate in this industry, and many managed to return home with a decent

bounty that enabled them and their families to live a relatively comfortable life in the village. In fact, most, if not, all of the new concrete houses built within and around the *guminju* in the late 1980s and early 1990s were a direct result of successful duck breeding stints. This is evidenced during another group interview, which included the participation of Teacher Zhu:

Teacher Zhu: In the thirty years between the liberation and the reform eras, the housing situation in Heyang was very challenging. Heyang only had a few individual dwellings, and they housed twenty some households. Meanwhile, up to fifty or sixty people lived in the large courtyard-style dwellings at one time. It was an incredibly tense situation; many people even installed their cooking stoves near ceilings and in very narrow hallways.

Interviewer:<sup>38</sup> Why didn't they build anymore homes?

Teacher Zhu: No money, of course [...] The village commune was also poor. How did people have money to build homes when filling their bellies was even a daily concern?

Interviewer: Where did the money come from when new houses were built in the 80s and 90s?

Teacher Zhu: After the reform and opening up, people *went out* to breed ducks. They *went out* to make money to return.

Interviewer: These homes were pretty much [built by] the first wave of duck breeders, who came back after they made money?

Teacher Zhu: Yes. We're farmers after all, our first priority is houses, right? Farmers' consciousness rests on building a home for themselves and their families. (Group Interview, February 24, 2019, Heyang Village)

From this conversation, Teacher Zhu reiterates two key points: firstly, rural life during the collective era was limited in terms of not only resources and options, but there was also a levelling effect by the *hukou* (household registration) system that kept everyone born in the same place to the same degree of relative wealth; and secondly, immediately after the reforms

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<sup>38</sup> This group interview was conducted by me, Byron Hauck, and Xiaoxing Zhang. Zhang took the lead in this specific section (see Chapter 3, p. 80).

began, duck breeding became not only a significant contributor to the village's development and to locals' livelihood, but it immediately marked the beginning (or, the *reintroduction*) of social stratification in this rural context. Oakes and Schein (2006) align with scholars including Cheng and Seldon (1994), K. Chan and Zhang (1999) in arguing that during the Mao-era, the "hukou system was not implemented to limit population movement, much less keep people out of China's cities" (p. 5). Rather, what the hukou system "did was tie one's identity and fortunes to a specific place of residence" (Oakes & Schein, 2006, p. 5). As such, what duck breeding meant for these early collective-era practitioners was a way to sever, or at least momentarily subvert, this tie; and it was not so much a desire to sever one's ties to Heyang, rather, it was a desire to sever the tie that bound them to a fate predetermined by their place of birth during the Mao-era. As was the case across China's rural landscape, out-migration became an important household livelihood strategy in the immediate era of reform.

More importantly, even though other forms of work became accessible across the country, the legacy of duck breeding endured in Heyang. Despite the challenges, working as a self-employed household meant earning money without the need to labor for someone else. Locally, this was a livelihood strategy that was preferred over going out to *dagong*, a term that means "working for the boss" and which "connotes the collective experience of being subjugated to the capitalist regime of workplace" (Sun, 2010, p. 291). Leaving the rural hometown to *dagong* meant *going out* to become a subordinate subjectivity in the cities. Moreover, duck breeding was attractive because there was the potential to make a sudden and massive profit in only a few years' time. Especially in the immediate reform era, this industry was not yet oversaturated, and locals from Jinyun occupied a notable share of the market. Aside from acquiring duck eggs, a means of transportation, and a small sum of capital to set up a duck

pen, few other resources were needed to get started. Meanwhile, a historic legacy of knowhow and related *guanxi* – transactional social relations that Yangjie Bian (2019) describes as “personal, close, resourceful” (p. 1) – were available to facilitate the venture. These *guanxi* created a network of duck farmers, industry resources, and knowledge that would be passed through one family member to another, from neighbour to neighbour, or even from generation to generation. Teacher Zhu also brings to light the importance of housing in the psyche of locals, and how the ability to construct a new house was high on the list of household goals and priorities. The importance and significance of housing in rural China has been widely studied by researchers including Murphy (2002), who details in her ethnography how, besides providing shelter and warmth, house building also performs the important social role of enhancing ‘face’ and self-respect (pp. 103-104). Duck breeding was therefore critical to many households’ needs to achieve status and literally build certain ‘appearances’ – *face* – in their communities. The newly built houses stood as proof that this industry was a viable path out of relative poverty, and they stood as physical differentiators of wealth and status in a post-Mao era.

#### **4.2.3. The Embeddedness of Duck Breeding and Shrimp Farming**

The seeds for what would be contemporary Heyang’s culture of migration were planted and sowed. Over the years, duck breeding even dovetailed into many other related industries to create ‘industry chains’ that diversified migrants’ portfolios across the country. Moreover, throughout the 90s, the national flourishing of livestock and seafood industries also took off with the nationwide lifting of people into higher earning brackets, meaning that an increasing portion of the national population was able to afford more food. Consumption and production were on the rise. In adapting to national and international market demands, available supply chains, and national policy directives, fisheries and floriculture, but especially shrimp farming,

became prominent avenues of livelihood for Heyang's migrants throughout the late 1990s and 2000s as well. By the 2010s, remittances and returnees from these industries still made up a substantial portion of the village's overall revenue stream. Aquaculture and aquiculture are even recorded in the village's permanent archive as Heyang's mainstay industries. An archive entry dated October 2012 provides further support to the anecdotal claims above in the following passage:

Heyang has many people but little land. Labor is abundant and overflowing. In order to find a way out [of hardship], when the reform era began, over a thousand people left Heyang and arrived at places like Guangdong, Shanghai, Fujian, Shandong, Guangxi, etc. They began breeding shelduck and were able to lift themselves out of poverty. In the late 90s, fisheries, shrimp farming, and duck egg processing industries began flourishing as well. (Heyang village permanent archives, October 2012, retrieved February 2019)<sup>39</sup>

This entry continues to detail how there were over 180 households engaged in duck breeding and fisheries, and another 72 that specialized in shrimp farming at the time. Together, the three industries pulled in an annual revenue of 18 million yuan (US\$2.6 million), with shrimp farming taking the lion's share at 15 million yuan (US\$2.1 million) and the duck and fish industries totaling 1.3 million (US\$190,509) and 5.2 million yuan (US\$762,038), respectively. It was also estimated that 260,000 shelduck were being bred outside of Heyang, and collectively, these migrant households operated over 2,600mu<sup>40</sup> in fishponds and 2,160mu for shrimp ponds. Meanwhile, another 400mu of land was used for flower beds in Shanghai, where households who specialized in floriculture collectively reported an annual revenue of 3 million yuan (US\$439,637). For perspective, there was a total of 1,226 households registered in Heyang in

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<sup>39</sup> This was retrieved from the Heyang Village commission's office, digitally shared by Xiaoxing Zhang.

<sup>40</sup> One *mu* equals roughly 0.165 acres.

2012, meaning well over 20% of Heyang's households were engaged in just the abovementioned duck breeding and aquaculture industries alone. As this is a measure of households, this does not include individual residents who left to work in these fields, indicating that the total percentage of Heyang's registered residents who had out-migrated for such purposes would be even higher.

Therefore, even though these industries operate predominantly outside of the village, they are nonetheless integral to the local economy. In fact, as I gathered from many conversations with locals, the term for breeding ducks, *yangya* 养鸭, and the term for farming shrimp, *yangxia* 养虾, are frequently used *in lieu* of any other expression for out-migration. In many instances, they are even used as blanket terms for explaining someone's absence from the village altogether. The slight distinction between duck or shrimp even suggests the general age range of the migrant. Those most involved in breeding ducks were born before the early 70s, whereas the relatively younger generations were more likely to be in the shrimp farming business. This slight generational difference could be discerned from group and individual interviews in Heyang, where *yangya* (duck breeding) came up more frequently amongst conversations with the elder generations (60 and above) and in conversations with those born in the post 70s-early 90s who spoke about their parents' generation. Meanwhile, *yangxia* (shrimp farming) was more prevalent amongst the younger groups, either described as personal lived experiences for those in their 30s-early 50s or used by the post late 90s-00s to describe their parents' experiences. Those in their fifties likely had experience in both duck breeding and shrimp farming, as many transitioned from the former industry into the latter as China's international seafood exports began growing.

There are certain parallels to the booming of the duck breeding industry and the later success of shrimp farmers. As described by Ye Dong, a post-90's young entrepreneur whose story is discussed in chapter 6, people of Jinyun were also the first few to jump aboard the shrimp ship in the early 2000s. In his words:

a few people left Jinyun very early to farm shrimp. They made it big. They saw instant riches in a year's time, more than anyone else during that time. I remember this very clearly, they went out with just a few hundred thousand, but came back with a million. In one year. They showed that there was such an opportunity to do this, and word spread quickly. It spread from one village to another village, and from these villages, people *went out* in droves. (Group Interview, February 16, 2019, Heyang Village)

Just as 800 yuan was enough to spur farmers during the collective era into motion – and even risk their lives for it – the potential of millions in the postreform era was also enough of a catalyst to spread word about shrimp farming. Furthermore, just as the early duck breeders managed to establish strong local networks through *guanxi*, this was similarly the case for shrimp farmers. According to Ye Dong:

If you look especially at the people [farming shrimp] in Guangdong and Hainan, everyone within the aquaculture circles knew each other, and every newcomer was brought out by someone within the circle, one after the other. [...] A lot of people *went out*, and [later] some even bought out fishponds to produce shrimp feed. Within the 'shrimp feed circle' all the bosses are Jinyun people. The shrimp farming bosses are Jinyun people, the fishpond bosses are Jinyun people [...] it was Jinyun people who ran the entire industry chain. (Group Interview, February 16, 2019, Heyang Village)

Suffice it to say, both duck breeding and shrimp farming are not only essential livelihood strategies, but they have also created *extralocal communities* of place-based kinship outside of the region (see Oakes & Schein, 2006). Ultimately, these industries are deeply embedded in the everyday language of Heyang and in the understandings of life and in being 'a person from Heyang.' For instance, when I asked local resident Zhu Meiyan, a widow in her mid-70s, for

the whereabouts of her son, she replied simply with: *yangya*. Without needing any further elaboration, it was already implied that her son – who she later revealed was 53 years old at the time – was away from Heyang breeding ducks, likely to help support Meiyang and the rest of his family. As it turns out, Meiyang not only had little income aside from a modest retirement pension, but she also lived with her son’s adult daughter and *her* two children. Spanning four generations, Meiyang, her granddaughter, and her great grandchildren were living in a newly built 160m<sup>2</sup> home in the new village area outside of the *guminju*, to which their household had relocated on instruction from the local government after their old heritage home was reclaimed by the state for the further development and commercialization of the ‘Xiangzhou Tourism’ site. Meiyang’s granddaughter, born in the early 90s, later joined the conversation with her two young children in tow. When asked about her husband, she simply replied with: *yangxia* (Interview, January 19, 2019, Heyang Village).

#### 4.2.4. Duck Breeding: A Cultural Industry

As I engaged deeper in the topic of duck breeding and aquaculture during my stays in Heyang, I soon learnt that the history of the local shelduck extends back to even before the Mao-era, and almost to the very origins of the village itself. This was also conveyed to me in the first group interview mentioned above through the following exchange between Weizhong and Zhu Chengwu, a farmer in his 70s:

Weizhong: [Duck breeding] is something handed down from our ancestors.

Chengwu: Over here, we are the ‘Hometown of Duck-breeding,’<sup>41</sup> and ‘Hometown of the Shelduck.’<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> *yangya zhixiang* 养鸭之乡

<sup>42</sup> *maya zhixiang* 麻鸭之乡

Weizhong: This duck breed has existed in Jinyun since the Song dynasty. That's why we say that it was passed down to us from our ancestors. (Group Interview, February 22, 2019, Heyang Village)

In chapter 2, I touched upon the importance of historical 'origins' in the construction of the Heyang-tale as well as its role in the presentation of a Heyang 'brand' for the promotion and marketing of tourism. The conversation above highlights that this emphasis on origins continues even through these discussions surrounding the humble shelduck. Weizhong's mention of ancestral and historical legacies is akin to the constant reference back to Heyang's founding under the apical Zhu ancestor during the Five Dynasties Ten Kingdoms (see pp. 43-45), which has become an indispensable component of the narrative delivered during the Heyang tourism experience. Similarly, the tale of the shelduck has been inextricably woven into the scripts of the village's tour guides as they lead groups of tourists through ancient village's history. The shelduck thereby adds more substance and value to the tourism enterprise, and, simultaneously, the constant retelling of the shelduck tale through the tourist experience sustains and enriches the historic and cultural value of not only the shelduck, but also a reified culture of migration.

The shelduck is also critical to the ongoing economic development of the village because of the cultural recognition and capital amassed from the reputation of local duck farmers outside of Jinyun. In fact, the entire township of Xinjian claims shelduck breeding to be its "golden calling card," *jinmingpian* 金名片. This was not without reason, as in 1997, the title of "Hometown of the Shelduck" was officially bestowed onto the county by the National State Council's Development Research Centre. The shelduck was also included in both the 2016 and 2018 iterations of the Jinyun "Xiangchou Industries" plan (see p. 115), thereby linking its development and its symbolic importance as a cultural phenomenon to the county's development, as well as to the county's response to national-level policies such as the Rural

Revitalization Strategy. All of these industries and the linkages created within them speak not only to the village's culture of migration, but also to the construction of the 'Heyang identity' as well as to the construction of Heyang's *xiangchou*. This is most evident in this specific breed of shelduck, which, on the one hand, is considered a prized and valuable local product and a key source of residents' livelihood; but on the other hand, is of necessity raised outside of Heyang and in other parts of the country. In many respects, shelduck breeding is an important piece of cultural heritage, and its recognized value both within and beyond Heyang has been built by mobility and the act of *going out*. It is therefore arguable that the culture of shelduck breeding *transcends the parameters of migration* altogether; it is not just part of the culture of migration, but ultimately, the practice of migrating to breed shelduck is inherently part of Heyang culture and of being a *heyangren*, a person of Heyang.

Clearly, mobility has been integral to building the village's identity and shaping its socioeconomic landscape, while this cycle of out-migration and return continues to sustain Heyang's economy and shape its industry; Or, perhaps more aptly, Heyang's lack of *in situ* industry. In other words, similar to a situation in many other migrant-sending communities, a culture of migration has made Heyang village into a place for human social reproduction, but not a place for any substantial economic production. The prominence of Heyang's cyclical migration perpetuates what Pun and Lu (2010) describe as the "spatial separation of production in urban areas and reproduction in the countryside" (p. 427); though perhaps more precise to the case at hand, it is the spatial separation of *production in other rural areas* and reproduction in Heyang. Moreover, as the village archive indicated, very few people and households are engaged in agricultural or manufacturing industries within the village itself. The only notable industry aside from ducks and shrimps that village officials expended any effort in detailing in

the archive was Heyang's 'Xiangchou Tourism,' which was still fledgling and embroiled in conflict in 2012. As the following chapters explain, moreover, tourism was still struggling to see tangible financial returns throughout the 2010s. It is from this cultural and historical context of migration wherein the effort and challenges in building and in sustaining local industries, especially under the purview of the county's "Xiangchou Industries" initiatives, should be understood. Heyang's "economy of *xiangchou*" is built upon what is ultimately a nest where eggs may be laid, but the ducklings are eventually led to water, leaving the nest empty and barren until their return.

#### **4.3. A Culture at a Crossroads: Reconsidering Migration against the Budding of Tourism**

Modern advances in technology and transportation infrastructure have eliminated many of the challenges involved with duck breeding, shrimp farming, and other aquaculture ventures. However, in some respects, these industries have now become more precarious. In addition to increased market competition, Heyang's duck breeders, shrimp farmers, and other aquaculturalists are also facing heightened risks of natural disasters and contractions of disease that have arguably become more volatile due to years of environmental degradation and the impacts of global warming. These unpredictable conditions serve as a humbling reminder of the often vengeful forces of mother nature that drive many to, in the parlance of Heyang locals, "rely on the heavens for a bite to eat," *kaotianchifan* 靠天吃饭. In fact, it is not uncommon to hear locals refer to duck breeding and shrimp farming as going out to *duyiba* 赌一把, that is, to "take a gamble" with one's fortunes.

### 4.3.1. The Shifting Tide of Aquaculture

Based on interviews, informal discussions, and knowledge gathered from archives and the Heyang Zhu Clan genealogy, outcomes from duck breeding or shrimp farming can be highly unpredictable, where one's fortunes can change entirely overnight for the better, or for the worst. While some households experience instant riches (*baofu* 暴富), others break even, whilst others fall into debt. The most dreaded outcome – perhaps aside from death – is falling into a cycle of debt that is so crippling that the entire household is devastated at least until the next generation starts working. Moreover, this devastation results in not only the loss of money, but also of social capital. In most cases, *going out* involves informal borrowing from friends, neighbors, and family, and the inability to repay these debts means owing both financial and emotional favors across the village. These extremes and the even more volatile and unpredictable teetering between these extremes add even more validity to the metaphor of gambling. Even for families that manage to break even, many find themselves 'trapped' in a prolonged cycle of continuous out-migration and return that can span over most of their lifetime. With each gamble they take by *going out* they are again tempting fate and exposing themselves to the risks of irrecoverable debt,<sup>43</sup> not to mention, there is also the irrecoverable time spent away from home and from loved ones 'left behind' and awaiting their return. This is a cycle similarly described by one of Murphy's (2002) informants in Qifeng, who likens the act and perceived 'need' of *going out* to an opium addiction: "Working outside is like a drug, the more you go out the more you spend, and then you have to go out again. It is just like opium" (p. 111). In Heyang, the potentially life-altering effects of these industries is further elucidated by Ye Dong when he explains,

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<sup>43</sup> According to a study conducted by Turvey and Kong (2010), informal lending between friends and family occurred in 67% of the surveyed rural households across various Chinese provinces that were in some form of debt (p. 546).

Nowadays, the people who farm shrimp, a lot are those who come from families that are truly very poor. That's why they choose to *duyiba*. If they succeed, then they will make a lot of money and they will come back. But there are a lot who fail. Some fail miserably, yet they continue to gamble. Whereas others fail and come back immediately, hoping instead that the next generation [can do better]. (Group Interview, February 16, 2019, Heyang Village)

Ye Dong's words provide not only a glimpse into the psyche that compels locals to *duyiba*, but, more importantly, he also provides a glimpse into what can be perceived as a potential shift taking place within this culture of migration, where, aside from the truly desperate, many are beginning to question the utility and value of out-migration for shrimp farming. This new hesitancy became even more pronounced throughout the 2010s, when stricter environmental protection laws and policies cracked down heavily on these industries, which are very environmentally damaging.

Indeed, China has certainly had its fair share of criticism within the international arena for its heavily polluting and unregulated factories and processes of manufacturing and mass production. The severity of China's environmental degradation had spilled into its food supply chains, and this was not only an issue concerning China's global reputation as a seafood supplier, but this was also a severe warning to China's own food health and safety concerns. Speaking to this issue in an interview with David Barboza for *the New York Times* in 2007, Professor Wang Wu of Shanghai Fisheries University explained how China "blindly emphasized economic growth" for half a century, and how, as a consequence, this fervent pursuit for high GDP created "food safety and environmental pollution accidents" every year (Barboza, 2007). Meanwhile, at the level of the individual engaged in these industries, including many shrimp and duck farmers from Heyang, each year of environmental crisis at the level of international trade translated into a potentially devastating year of personal financial ruin. According to Heyang native and long-time out-migrant, Zhu Runshan:

our shrimp couldn't pass customs inspection in Japan. Some said it was because there was some kind of chemical found in the shrimp, I also heard from others that China-Japan relations were tense at the time. Whatever the reason, for us, we had finally succeeded in breeding a great crop of shrimp, yet we couldn't sell it for a good price at all. (Interview, February 2020, Heyang Village)

When Xi Jinping was still the Zhejiang provincial party secretary, he allegedly uttered the phrase, “clear waters and green mountains are mountains of gold and silver,”<sup>44</sup> during an official visit to one of the counties in the province in 2005 (Kuhn, 2020). The Zhejiang provincial government has since pinned its development loosely to this phrase, giving way to the campaign of “Constructing a Beautiful Zhejiang,” which has translated into an increased amount of attention and resources devoted to protecting and highlighting the province's natural resources. By 2015, this phrase was even officially inscribed into the CCP's lexicon, as it became an essential part of Xi Jinping's “Two Mountains” theory, itself built into the national goal and articulation of constructing an “Ecological Civilization” (Zhang Xiaode, 2017; Geall, 2017). It emerged again when it was infused into the rhetoric of “Constructing a Beautiful China” by Xi Jinping during his opening speech of the 19<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the CCP in 2017 (Xi, 2017). Suffice it to say, at least at the level of discourse, there was a much-needed urgency placed upon the mission to salvage China's ecological environment after decades of pollution, exploitation, and neglect of the nation's natural resources. However, it was industries like aquaculture and livestock that were caught in the crosshairs of this green initiative. Based on the findings of X. Liu et al. (2020), pond aquaculture – the kind of aquaculture that many of shrimp farmers from Heyang are engaged in – is particularly polluting and environmentally demanding. In their study, they describe how over 40% of China's agricultural water supply

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<sup>44</sup> The original phrase in mandarin Chinese is: *lvshuiqingshanjiushishanyinshan* 绿水青山就是金山银山. It is also commonly translated as “lucid water and lush hills are mountains of gold and silver mountains.”

was used towards freshwater pond aquaculture in 2018, and how in Zhejiang province's city of Huzhou, aquaculture accounted for 2% of all chemical oxygen demand (COD), which meant that aquaculture was a significant source of pollution in rivers (Liu, et al., 2020, p. 4). However, as Ying Zhang, Albert Bleeker, and Junguo Liu (2015) argue, aquaculture has played "an essential role in China's food security" in terms of national protein consumption (p. 9). And in Heyang, these industries were essential to providing livelihood and income. This concern was directly addressed by the Xinjian Township government as well in a public letter, which they opened with:

'40,000 duck farmers venture out under the heavens;' For decades this has served as the 'golden calling card' that has brought riches to Xinjian. From 'duck farmers' to 'shrimp farmers,' the hardworking spirit you have all brought with you under the heavens has been consistently deserving of praise. However, in the recent years, the disadvantages in aquaculture have become more and more prominent, the risks have increased, and there are more instances where one has to look to the heavens for a bite to eat. Moreover, in addition to the *wushuigongzhi*, *sangaiyichai*,<sup>45</sup> and other environmental protection policies pushed out nation-wide, survival has become more challenging, and [this industry] is facing a bottleneck. (The People's Government of Xinjian Township, Jinyun County, 2020)

This letter, which I discuss in detail in the following chapter, highlights the unsustainability of not only the practices of aquaculture, but also the unsustainability of relying upon these industries as locals' main sources of livelihood.

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<sup>45</sup> The *wushuigongzhi* 五水共治 and *sangaiyichai* 三改一拆 are new environmental protection policies first introduced by the Zhejiang province in 2016 and 2013, respectively. The former places emphasis on cleaning up the province's water sources, while the latter targets the demolition and renovation of dilapidated buildings and areas equivalent to 'urban slums' (more on *sangai yichai* can be found at: [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-03/09/c\\_1118283194.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-03/09/c_1118283194.htm)). The aquaculture and duck farming industries are especially impacted by the *wushuigongzhi* policy, and the proposed alternatives to how these industries could continue to develop are detailed by the Zhejiang provincial government at: <http://zjnews.zjol.com.cn/system/2016/06/22/021199052.shtml>.

#### 4.3.2. Five Stories of Return

Heyang resident Zhu Weijian is one returnee who had to tear down and abandon his duck farm near the prefectural city of Jiaxing in 2013 because of new environmental regulations in the region. The conversation with Weijian was also part of a focus group interview conducted in the *guminju*. He explained how he left Heyang in 1985 and was mostly engaged in various forms of livestock breeding and aquaculture in and around the Shanghai area since. He sent remittances back to Heyang frequently, constructed a new house for his family with his earnings, returned most holidays for short visits, and remained for longer periods in between the successes and failures of his various endeavors. Jiaxing was his last stop before deciding to return to Heyang more permanently in 2014, and he did so not only because of the sudden loss of his livelihood, but also because he felt older, weaker, and no longer as mentally fit as he once was. “I’m already sixty-one years old” he said with a laugh.

Almost half Weijian’s age, Zhu Yijia, a ‘millennial bachelor,’ was also a recent returnee to Heyang. Born in 1989, Yijia left Heyang in his mid 20s and went to the city of Zhengzhou in Henan province where he enrolled in a higher education institution known for its expertise in animal husbandry. “After graduating, I went to Shanghai where I became licensed to sell veterinary drugs,” he explained, and whilst pointing a finger coyly at Weijian, he said: “I helped treat their ducks of diseases.” Although Yijia was not a duck breeder himself, his experience with out-migration is also intimately tied to this industry, further demonstrating the impact of these networks and industry chains that have proliferated from this distinct culture of migration. Yijia’s return to Heyang was also a result of new restrictions that forced people like Weijian to cease their operations. In his words: “It was also because they weren’t allowed to breed ducks anymore, [that’s why] I came back. It’s been 2-3 years since I’ve been back now” (Group Interview, February 23, 2019, Heyang Village).

In the same group interview, Zhu Hufen also shared her experiences of out-migration and return. She revealed that she was born in Shanghai when her parents were there to breed ducks. However, because both of her parents had Heyang *hukou*, she too was a person of Heyang. “This was over forty years ago,” she explained, “my father left when he was only 19 years old, that was 1981.” By the time Hufen was of age to attend primary school, her parents brought her back to Heyang, where she remained with her mother while her father returned to the ducks. After completing junior high, she accompanied her mother to Shanghai, where they rejoined her father and their flock. She was in her 30s at the time of the interview. Seated beside Hufen was Li Yinhui, who explained her experience of migration in the following manner:

I am also a person of Heyang, my mom is from here, and I also studied here until I finished junior high. Afterwards I went out on my own to work, I opened a clothing store for a while [...] When I got married and had a family of my own, I went out again, but to do aquaculture, we farmed shrimp for five years.

Between 2010-2012, Yinhui and her husband, also a person from Heyang, managed to make a decent revenue from shrimp farming. However, as she further explains:

it became much more challenging in the later years. I began losing more than I earned, and anyhow, our contract was coming to an end,<sup>46</sup> so we stopped doing this work. Most people made losses by then, and they would lose a couple hundred thousand at a time. I was able to at least recover my initial investment, I was already very fortunate, so we came back immediately. I have never gone out again. (Group Interview, February 23, 2019, Heyang Village)

Yinhui ceased doing aquaculture in 2015 and returned to Heyang with her entire nuclear family, rejoining her ageing parents and in-laws. When asked why they chose to relocate back home instead of starting a new venture elsewhere, she said that this was also a decision compelled by

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<sup>46</sup> This refers to the contract she signed with either local villagers or local officials for the rights to use land.

her responsibilities as a mother to children with Heyang *hukou*. “I think I chose to come back to Heyang for my children too,” she explains, “they are in school now. Now that home is close to school, I am able to take care of them here.” Both Yinhui’s and Hufen’s stories truly emphasize the ‘cyclical’ in cyclical migration. By the time Hufen’s eldest daughter completed the fifth grade in Shanghai,<sup>47</sup> Hufen also made the decision to leave her duck farm. As her mother did for her when she was a young child, Hufen returned to Heyang with her two children so they could continue their schooling based in their place of household registration (Group Interview, February 23, 2019, Heyang Village).

#### 4.3.3. Heyang, A Place with ‘Nothing to Do’

The four discussed above are connected by similar narratives of out-migration and return that revolved in some way around the shelduck at various stages of their lives. Once that line of work no longer proved to be sustainable or profitable, or when it no longer supported their other responsibilities, goals, and priorities (see Murphy, 2002, Chapter 1), they decided to return to Heyang, where their stories were then shaped by the rise of the *guminju*’s tourism industry. Indeed, at the time this focus group took place, all four were employed at the tourist site by or through the Jinyun County Heyang Village Culture and Tourism Development Company (henceforth, Tourism company) – a corporate entity registered under the MC to oversee the commercial development of the tourist site.

Although Weijian had passed the age of retirement, he explained how he still needed to work because the losses he had incurred in the final years of duck farming had swallowed up all his savings. However, feeling unable to *go out* because of his age and unable to do

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<sup>47</sup> Hufen explains how there was no longer a “borrowing fee” for children with outside *hukou*, however, there were still many applications, procedures, and administrative barriers that made schooling outside of her child’s *hukou* far more costly and complicated.

agricultural work because he had no land to his own name,<sup>48</sup> he felt his options limited in Heyang. In fact, in a separate focus group, the village head also admitted that there was little money to be made in Heyang. In his words:

Long term residents here are primarily elders because we don't have salaries to give out. No salaries to give out, so [many] make money outside, [those who] can't make money go hungry, that's how it is here, [there is] no money to give out, you can only *go out*. (Group Interview, February 25, 2019, Heyang Village)

The village head's words reiterate the issue of Heyang's overall lack of industry, and the fact that there was little for villagers to do for work. Meanwhile, there was an overall lack of collective income and any form of collective resources for the village commission, meaning that the leadership itself was rather impoverished. As the village head said, there was little they could give to villagers in terms of benefits or even paid work. At most, villagers could register themselves with the village accountant to take on odd jobs, such as clearing a renovation site of debris, for a humble pay of 80 yuan (US\$11.94) per day, or 200 yuan (US\$29.86) a day for work considered more technical, such as masonry. However, this allocation of work was also became a source of tension within the village. As the village head further explains, prior to his tenure, there were more demolition and construction projects that took place in the village, meaning there was more work to give out to villagers. Moreover, because village affairs were under the control and jurisdiction of the village double committee (VDC), the hiring process and the division of funds was more transparent and straightforward. With the introduction of the MC, however, the VDC lost much control over the village, as they effectively became subordinate to

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<sup>48</sup> Weijian has many siblings and the division of land became a complicated negotiation within his family. He was not allocated any land. When Weijian and his wife had their son, it was under his wife's *hukou* that their son was registered to help the continuation of her family lineage. In these circumstances, the husband can choose to transfer his own *hukou* over to his spouse's side as well, however, Weijian did not choose to do so, and therefore has no land to his own name.

this new governing entity (see Chapter 2, p. 68). Yet, because the distinction between the MC and the VDC is often unclear, there was much confusion surrounding what work was available and who got to do it. Meanwhile, it became challenging for the village leadership to even explain to villagers why there was a lack of work and pay, despite the fact that the official narrative continued to talk about how much Heyang was ‘improving’ because of tourism.

As I learnt through another focus group with members of the VDC, resentment was especially pronounced among those villagers who assumed that favoritism played a role in work assignments. This was an issue that the Party Secretary tried to address during a large village assembly, which was attended by all residents who were present in Heyang at the time. “I wanted to stop the rumors,” he said, “I needed to clear the air about certain things.” Out of the ‘certain things’ that needed clarifying, many were about work and wages. In the Party Secretary’s words:

It is like this in our village, villagers who work for the village [commission] can collect a salary. Some appear to others that they have good *guanxi* with us cadres, and therefore get more work. Others also assume that the village head and I only take care of those in our close circles; that we only give out bigger projects to them. I clarified that I already installed a new system for work allocation. I asked every resident to register themselves with the accountant if they are interested in participating in village work. I said that salaries are low, but the work is easy. If you have interest in your heart to work, go register with the accountant.

200 people were registered with the village accountant after the assembly. However, according to the Party Secretary, when there was work assigned, none took the call. Apparently, the accountant phoned up to 40-50 people at a time to no avail, and even those who did answer would not show up on the day. “Why didn’t you participate even when we called?” the Party Secretary asked rhetorically. He was evidently frustrated. However, his tone softened as he continued,

I explained this to them during the assembly too, I said, “it is not as though I am blaming you. But you cannot blame us cadres either. You can’t say we are playing favorites. This simply is not true. There can be work for you, but you have to show up.” (Group Interview, February 25, 2019, Heyang Village)

Villager accountability in this issue is complicated, and it is unknown to me why villagers did not show up in the way the Party Secretary described. For some, it might have been as simple as a missed phone call, others may have left the village to pursue other forms of work in the interim, while some others may have felt the pay was simply too low and the work was not worth doing. In fact, favoritism indeed *did* influence work allocation, however, this took place not within the VDC, but within the MC. Better opportunities and larger projects were reserved for contractors that were not from Heyang, and whose teams consisted of migrant laborers, who, ironically, would migrate to Heyang to work on its tourist site. In other words, both the villagers and its elected officials were excluded from the decisions and even the profit that could be made from their own village’s development. Setting these complications aside, the 80 yuan that could be made from piecemeal work was hardly enough to support households, especially not for those with family members who still needed to achieve major life milestones and plan for contingency funds for (un)expected life events and tragedies. Suffice it to say, work in Heyang truly was scarce, and this harkens back to a point made by Weizhong during the conversation about the origins of shelduck breeding when he said:

There is no future in agriculture. You can only make pennies a day. You can’t do it. You have to go out. At home, there is no one except people with technical skills like masonry and carpentry, [everyone else] has run out. (Group Interview, February 22, 2019, Heyang Village)

Although Weizhong was depicting Heyang in the immediate reform era, the fact that this phrase still applied to the era at hand makes evident that despite the effort put into the tourism enterprise since the early 2000's, little has changed in over 40 years of reform on the fronts of industry and the village's ability to adequately (re)absorb its own work force. If anything, the village commission had fewer resources and control, as most of the proceeds from tourism were squeezed out by the MC, an entity that belonged to the County, not the village. The options for most returnees upon their return were two-fold. Some eventually decided to go out again – because they did not earn enough, or they made enough but spent too much, or they simply felt *too idle* at home. Others considered themselves as retired and passed the baton to the next generation.

When he returned from Jiaxing, Weijian, who would have otherwise retired, became an exception to this trajectory as he was able to land a paid position within the village commission as the captain for the village's public security unit, a sub-commission akin to a Neighborhood Watch. Several of Weijian's tasks involved being sent to the *guminju* to assist the MC with maintaining public order in the tourist site. According to Weijian, leaders within the MC quickly took note of his work ethic and reliability. After he was let go from his post during a mass personnel turnover within the VDC, the MC offered him a job to help look after the tourist site. His pay was modest, and because of his age, he was essentially considered a 're-hired retiree,' thereby excluding him from any employment insurance and benefits. However, he expressed gratitude for the work, which helped him put food on the table and gave him a sense of worth.

Yijia found himself in the tourist site because he had 'nothing to do,' *meishigan* 没事干. During my fieldwork, interlocutors of all genders and age categories replied with the phrase *meishigan* when I inquired about their work or employment situations – past, present, and

planned – in the village. This is a phrase that Tamara Jacka (2006) similarly encountered during her discussions with rural migrant women in Beijing. According to Jacka (2006), *meishigan* “conceals rather more than it explains” and it “connotes not just inactivity and the boredom that goes with it but also a sense of worthlessness” (p. 133). Although Jacka was depicting the marginalization of rural women in the urban economy, I argue that this sense of worthlessness embedded in this otherwise plain-sounding phrase also exists when spoken in the context of Heyang. *Meishigan* means being unable to find work and being unable to (or in some instances, unwilling to) *go out* to find work elsewhere. It means to be idle. But this idleness not only speaks of the valuation of work and the devaluation of the self that is out of work, it also affirms the lack of industry in the village overall. This resonates with Jacka’s findings from her interlocutors, many of whom left their respective places of origin because of a lack of work, but for whatever reasons, also found themselves returning to their village only to be confronted, again, with *meishigan*. Furthering her analysis of this phrase, Jacka (2006) muses: “which came first – outmigration or the widespread notion that there is nothing to do in the village” (p. 133)? In Heyang, it is arguable that it was the former. That is, before there was even a chance to establish much industry locally, in the words of Weizhong, “people left in droves – [they] all ran out as soon as they could, and they did so to breed ducks” (Group Interview, February 23, 2019, Heyang Village).

After returning from Shanghai, Yijia tried to work in a factory in Xinjian, but quit very soon after, citing “boredom and demanding working hours” as the main reasons for his leave. He also tried his hand briefly at e-commerce, but he only managed to do this for a year. “I had nothing to do at home anyways, so I tried e-commerce.”<sup>49</sup> But many people sold [the same

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<sup>49</sup> As an aside, e-commerce was flourishing in other parts of Jinyun County, but Heyang was restricted by the top-down prioritization on tourism and heritage protection.

products] at cheaper prices. My import fees were higher than theirs... I wasn't competitive enough, so I came here," he explained. By 'here' he meant the tourist site, where he worked as a ticket collector at the entrance of the *guminju*. Meanwhile, both Yinhui and Hufen were hired on the recommendation of Heyang's 'star tour guide,' Zhu Yunlin, whom I introduced in Chapter 2. "I tricked them into coming here," Yunlin teased, "[Hufen] was especially on the fence about coming, but I convinced her, [I told her] she could better take care of her children if she worked here." To this, Hufen concurred, saying her children and family were her priorities, a comment that received fervent nods of agreement from Yinhui as well. According to Yinhui, her initial reluctance to work for the Tourism Company was the low pay. She came to inquire about a tour guide role in 2015, when she had just returned from shrimp farming. At the time, the MC was under different leadership and the director had a different vision for how the heritage site should be managed, preserved, and developed. Resources within the MC were allocated differently at the time as well, and through the Tourism Company, tour guides were paid based on their levels of education, with the lowest tier being 800 yuan (US\$117) per month, and a monthly salary of 1,260 yuan (US\$184) for those with a high school diploma and above. An additional 20 yuan (US\$2.93) would be paid as commission per each tour group they led. Having only completed junior high, 800 was too low a salary for Yinhui to consider. However, when the MC switched leadership in 2017, it also shifted its resources to reflect a greater focus on enhancing the tourist experience. The base wage for all tour guides was raised to 1,260 yuan per month, a salary that Yinhui agreed to. "At the end of the day," she reasoned, "it doesn't matter what the salary is, I am here to take care of my children, so any job I can do here is good enough, that's why I decided to come." With a little more reflection, she expressed how she enjoyed working at home and considered herself to be fortunate. "Working here, the entire village feels very intimate and

familiar. Aside from holidays, it is not busy, and I feel good working here. Life is not as difficult [as when I was out].” Although she also felt the pay was low, Hufen similarly expressed her gratitude for being able to work in the tourist site. She was especially pleased that, like her friend Yinhui, she was able to remain in the village and take care of her family. Out of these five informants, Hufen was the only one who still lived in a traditional dwelling within the *guminju*, whereas the others had relocated to the new village area in homes that they had purchased earlier with earnings from duck breeding and shrimp farming, or in Yunlin’s case, her combined salary as a tour guide with her husband’s earnings in aquaculture. When asked why she started working in the tourist site, Hufen’s first reply was: “*Woaiwojia* 我爱我家,” a phrase that expresses either her love for her family, her love for her home, her love for Heyang, or a combination of the above.

#### **4.3.4. Employed by the Tourism Company: A Fragile Safety Net**

Through these conversations, several observations can be made. Firstly, a job in the tourism company helped Weijian, who was no longer able to *go out* and who could not farm his own land, with some work and financial assistance. Meanwhile, it gave Yijia ‘something to do’ and he was able to evade the feelings of worthlessness and helplessness embedded within the state of being idle, to have *meishigan*. For Yinhui and Hufen, their roles as tour guides afforded them the opportunity to stay and work in Heyang and fulfill their duties as primary caregivers whilst also maintaining a certain degree of financial independence.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, having been separated from their hometown for prolonged periods, they also expressed a form of fulfillment

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<sup>50</sup> A more nuanced discussion on the gendered division of labor within contemporary rural China is beyond the scope of this chapter, but there is already an existing body of work that specifically study the migration, return migration, and their impacts on embedded and expected gendered household roles. By no means an exhaustive list, this includes Murphy (2002), Jacka and Gaetano (eds., 2004), Jacka (2006), Wallis (2013), Gaetano (2015), and Shui, Xu, Li, & Liu (2020).

in being able to settle more comfortably at home and for no longer needing to experience homesickness; in effect, feelings of *xiangchou* induced by their separation from their home and loved ones. Their personal attachments to Heyang are most clearly communicated through Yinhui's expression of *woaiwojia* (I love my home/hometown/family), as well as in Hufen's account of contentment, comfort, and familiarity.

In theory, the development of the village's tertiary sector should be a means to diversify the village economy and render it more self-sustaining and self-sufficient. At the level of the individual, it should provide new jobs and opportunities to improve residents' livelihoods, and it is arguably a way through which residents can reclaim their agency as stakeholders in the development and construction of their village's future. Specific to the context of Heyang, tourism should also mean an alternative to aquaculture and the need to *go out*. However, the experiences discussed here represent exceptional cases of local employment, rather than a more widely applicable reality for most of Heyang's residents. In fact, at the time of this writing, the five employees mentioned here represented almost the entirety of the locals who were directly hired by the MC to work on the tourist site. The limited nature of these employment opportunities is further highlighted by the fact that tourism had been developing for nearly two decades at this point. Not to mention, an ongoing source of contention within the village surrounds the fact that the majority of the employees in the tourist site are not locals. Rather, cadres from other parts of the county and the country, who are shuffled around and sent down from the county bureau or other similar posts elsewhere. Furthermore, despite feelings of relative satisfaction, most of the five interlocutors still expressed concern and uncertainty towards their futures.

Choosing to work at home under the Tourism Company meant no longer making

difficult personal and household sacrifices involved with out-migration. They no longer needed to endure the separation from the home. However, staying and working at home did mean making other compromises, the biggest being a significant decrease in income, and for the women in particular, added household responsibilities. During the interview, there was little mention of the women's spouses. I later found out that their husbands had found work as manual labor in factories within the township as well as other odd jobs that took them further within the county every so often. The women, whilst it appeared that they were now those who remained, they did not, however, feel 'left behind.' Nevertheless, Yinhui and Hufen recognized that their standards of living could not be sustained, especially considering their responsibilities as mothers to growing children, and daughters and daughters-in-law to ageing parents. "I still have the old above me and the young below, so it is imperative that I work hard," said Hufen, "but here, there is no way for me to do that. I need to at least be able to prepare for high medical expenses if the elderly fall ill, and for extra tutoring for my children... I don't think it will be this comfortable after a few years." This was a concern for Yunlin as well, who, despite her seeming loyalty to the company, was the most pessimistic about her future with Heyang. She described her relationship with not only the MC, but also her relationship to her hometown as one of love and hate. In her own words:

Initially, I [worked here] because I just wanted to make a few bucks to get by. But over time, I have been coming and going, coming and going. I've left so many times only to return again, I think I did this about 4-5 times... [each time] I just could not bear to continue [working], it was difficult to persevere. The first time, I only worked here for a total of three days before calling it quits. The second time... I can't recall, but it wasn't long either. (Group Interview, February 23, 2019, Heyang Village)

Unlike the others, Yunlin had lived most of her life locally. Even when she was not working fulltime in the *guminju*, she was still leading tours part time because of what she claimed to be

a lack of other options nearby. By the time her daughter turned four, Yunlin returned to work full time in the tourist site, only to leave again when she had a second child, a son. When he turned three, she came back to work fulltime for the Tourism Company, only to leave again one year later. According to her, it “hurt her heart” to continue working there because it was ultimately the low pay that made working at home a bitter pill to swallow. “It’s the money. In the beginning, my base pay was 180 yuan (US\$26) per month, and 5 kuai (US\$0.73) per tour,” she said wryly. When asked why she had not sought work elsewhere, she replied that staying in Heyang was her way of prioritizing her familial duties. “My kids are still young, so the first reason [for staying] is mainly for my children” (Group Interview, February 23, 2019, Heyang Village).

Evidently, Yunlin was conflicted. On the one hand, she admitted that things had improved, acknowledging how her salary and commission did increase incrementally to reach what was then her wage of 1,500 yuan (US\$220) per month. As of August 2018, this also included a commission of 50 yuan (US\$7.43) per tour. In addition to the pay raise, her other employment benefits also included a seniority allowance and a social insurance package, referred to as the *wuxianyijin* 五險一金.<sup>51</sup> On the other hand, however, she remained bitter; citing, for instance, how hard she had to fight for the insurance to be included and how she had even threatened her resignation over this issue. She also expressed resentment towards the gaping wage disparity between herself and others employed in similar tourism companies in wealthier regions across Jinyun. “It doesn’t matter if the MC has money or not, even if they do, they won’t give it to us. Whereas others [in Jinyun] can make 8,000 (US\$1,175), even 9,000

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<sup>51</sup> This refers to the “five insurance, one fund” policy, which encompasses insurance for retirement, medical claims, unemployment, work-related injuries, and childbirth, and funds for housing. **Error! Hyperlink reference not valid.**

(US\$1,322) a month... It's just not the same," she said. By comparing her situation in Heyang with tour guides in other places, however, her criticism was directed not at her own village for being 'lesser' *per se*, rather, it was a slight on the management and leadership within Heyang. In effect, Yunlin's 'complicated' relationship with her village, her dramatic saga of leaving and return, is a combination of her love for Heyang but her distaste for her salary and the MC's and VDC's leadership and handling of tourism. Moreover, contrary to Yinhui and Hufen, who were able to fulfill their roles as caretakers because of the job, Yunlin claimed that it was her familial duties and attachment to Heyang that prevented her from more attractive opportunities elsewhere. She felt the need to turn down several offers, including a senior role in a state-owned tourism company in Lishui City, and a managerial role in a privately-owned tourism agency in the county seat, which offered her a starting salary of 5,000 yuan (US\$734) per month. Between the three women, the complex web of negotiations between familial duties, personal goals, and household strategies are manifest. That is, out-migration has long served as a commonly practiced household livelihood strategy, and it is not uncommon to see both parents go out together because of the lack of income in the village. Once the next generation was involved, they planned and timed their journeys around their children's schooling schedules and the availabilities of parents and in-laws to take the central caretaking role if necessary and if possible. In most instances, children would be with their parents at their duck pens until they reached the age of junior high, but because their *hukou* is bound to Heyang, the household would have to confront the inevitable return of their child (on *hukou* and other related institutionalized inequalities in the compulsory education system, see for instance, Montgomery, 2012; Xu & Wu, 2016; and Gu & Yeung, 2020). Yunlin's inner conflicts, as well as these overarching complications and compromises made daily by Heyang's migrants are best expressed in

Yunlin's words as she says, "Frankly, my relationship with Heyang is a mixture of love and hate. I want to leave, yet I can't bear to leave it, what can I do? Perhaps this is *xiangchou*" (Group Interview, February 23, 2019, Heyang Village).

#### 4.3.5. Changing Values and Strategies: Making the Inevitable Return Permanent

At this juncture, another point worth noting is the way in which locals have always spoken about their out-migration as being temporary. That is, while *yangya* and *yangxia* are terms used to explain the reason for someone's absence, the nature of their absence is encapsulated in the term *chuqu* 出去, which is the verb for 'go out' in mandarin. This term is used in the context of describing out-migration in other rural settings as well. For instance, in Arianne Gaetano's and Tamara Jacka's (2004) edited volume on migrant rural women in contemporary China, the terms "go out" and "going out" were used 36 times and 8 times respectively by the various contributors to the book. Aside from a handful of instances, most were used in the context of leaving the rural hometown for work or for experiencing life elsewhere in the country. Out of the 36 mentions of "go out," eight were used in the phrase "go out to work," six of which were direct quotes taken from women of various rural backgrounds and with various experiences with migration. I highlight the usage of *chuqu*, to "go out," as it not only implies the act of leaving somewhere, but it also implicitly encapsulates its counterpart of *huiqu* 回去, to "go back." Therefore, accompanying out-migration is necessarily the act of return, even if that "return" is only enacted temporarily, verbally, or symbolically. As Murphy (2002) explains, "[e]ven migrants who are permanently absent from their villages invoke the 'narrative of return' to escape social and moral censure for forgetting home and to avoid confronting their ambivalence toward the native place and the social relationships there" (p. 25).

This is to say, while out-migration for work has become so commonplace that it can even be considered a socially expected, “rite of passage” (Murphy, p. 21), the notion of return is ultimately founded and grounded upon culture. The cultural and moral embeddedness of ‘return’ is even expressed through such idioms as *luoyeguigeng* 落叶归根, where fallen leaves eventually return to their roots. It is also encapsulated in the term *xiangchou*, where one’s anguish or longing, *chou* 愁, is oriented towards what they needed to leave, permanently, temporarily, or indefinitely.

However, given the increased precarity of aquaculture, the perceptions around out-migrating have shifted, and in the 2010s, household strategies were being reevaluated. In fact, if we take a further step back to assess the overall developmental context of Heyang during the time these interlocutors sought employment in the tourist site, it becomes apparent that their collective and individual experiences of aquaculture’s waning coincided not only with the rise of tourism, but also with the rebranding of Heyang’s *guminju* as a tourist site that revolves around and sells *xiangchou*. The resources poured into the MC by the county, as well as the increased power and authority bestowed upon this entity was further indication of Heyang’s status in the eyes of the local state. Specifically, the increased value placed upon the precious ‘Xiangchou Tourism’ site has focused the entire village’s attention onto this industry, thereby creating (in theory) more job opportunities, work, and higher salaries in tourism. Yet, as indicated by the village head, this work is still insufficient to be a main source of livelihood, with most residents excluded from participating in the endeavor. Furthermore, while working in the tourism industry presented itself as a viable option for Yinhui and Hufen, they feared it was only temporary. Their roles as tour guides were presented to them at opportune moments in their lives when shrimp farming no longer suited their goals and values, and when their children were nearing the age

where some form of return was imminent. They acknowledged how their household responsibilities would eventually outgrow their jobs in the tourist site if their work conditions and payment remained at the same level. But at least at the time of the interview, their roles as tour guides better aligned with their roles as mothers and daughters. As for Yijia, he saw out-migration as an inevitable next step. In his words:

When I was outside, I felt homesick. That was *xiangchou*. But when I came back, I no longer feel it. I don't have *xiangchou* anymore. When I worked outside, I missed home a lot. But now that I've been back for a while, I want to go out again. I need to make money. (Group Interview, February 23, 2019, Heyang Village)

Without a clear plan for how he would sustain his own living and plan for his future, in Heyang, Yijia just felt *chou*.

#### 4.4. Conclusion

One evening in January 2019, I caught word in Heyang that an event was being put on in the township. Intrigued, I made my way over, joining a crowd of people in a large public plaza near the elementary school. This plaza was recently renovated as part of the township's beautification efforts, and also as part of a county-wide initiative known as 'All-For-One-Tourism,' *quanyulvyou* 全域旅游, which, akin to the spirit of the Belt and Road Initiative, sought to converge and connect the entire county into a bustling tourist hub. Even prior to the massive renovation project, the plaza served as a site for public events, coming to life especially during the hot summer evenings and during public holidays when most 'migrants' – from duck breeders to students – returned home. It was an important public space that gave locals, especially younger returnees, somewhere to go and something to do. It was not uncommon to see (and hear) young adults drinking until the next morning, only to return the same evening

with their hangovers relatively subdued. It was a site for planned gatherings and chance encounters, an extension of community where everyone, including those who were absent for most of the year, were (re)connected and familiar. On a typical summer or holiday evening, the plaza was filled with food and beverage vendors, with barbecue skewers and beers being the standout theme across the lot. Earlier in the evening, there would also be vendors selling trinkets and toys for children and people operating games and activities such as giant inflatable slides, darts, and carousels; all of which gave the space an air of a local fair in an open-air community center. On that evening, however, the grounds were set up differently. Usually spread out across the lot, most of the food vendors were downsized and pushed to one end. Instead of seeing pods of dining tables, I saw rows of chairs oriented to face a giant stage.

By this point of my fieldwork, coming to this public square had also become routine for me, particularly on evenings when I had *meishigan*, nothing to do, otherwise. However, the presence of this stage had somehow evaded me. According to an informant, the stage was only set up on an ad hoc basis for shows, such as the one we were treated to that evening: a traditional Wu Opera, *wuju* 婺剧. “This opera troupe is quite well-known in the area,” my informant told me, “it must have cost quite a bit to invite them over.” Due to my ignorance, I made a remark about how nice it was for the local state to provide such forms of entertainment for its residents, to which my informant shook her head nonchalantly to say, “No, the government doesn’t do this.” As it turned out, while the stage was provided by the state as a public good, the show and all the other costs involved in putting on the production were neither publicly planned nor publicly funded. Rather, it was a household from Heyang that rented the stage and paid the local state for the use of the square to put on such a show; and they did so to celebrate the earnings they managed to make from a very successful year of shrimp farming.

I found out that it was a very common and traditionally rooted practice for households to celebrate grand occasions such as weddings and earnings through such public acts. It was not only a way to display and even peacock such occasions, but it was also a symbolic community-wide celebration to share in the success. Such a display, however, could cost tens of thousands of yuan. Even more interestingly, I learnt that another reason that families shared their bounty in this way was also to fulfill a promise made to the local gods and ancestors. This particular family had scaled a mountain to pray at one of the most culturally important temples in the region prior to their departure for shrimp farming. They had asked the local deities for good fortune and for their blessings, promising that if they did make enough money to build a house in Heyang, they would put on a show to entertain the heavens in return.

As this anecdote illustrates, the embeddedness of out-migration for aquaculture is so deeply intertwined with local culture and history that it is even entangled in such public and culturally important practices of ritual and ceremony. Meanwhile, such ceremonies and public fanfare around these earnings have become so commonplace and so expected that, aside from me – whose partial identity as an ‘outsider’ was revealed by my ignorance – everyone already knew that this show was a private celebration, made public. It is thereby worth noting that Heyang is not necessarily totally devoid of any industries. As discussed, tens of thousands of Heyang *ren* who left even before the reform era contributed significantly to the thriving of the duck breeding and shrimp farming industries across the nation. The fact that Heyang and Xinjian are even recognized at the national level for being the “hometown of duck farming” supports this point. Indeed, duck farming is a critical cultural industry that has shaped more than just the local culture of migration. It has also contributed to sustaining the village because remittances have financed the village’s physical growth and the expansion in the form of new houses and

other injections of capital. In other words, Heyang has a thriving industry and the people of Heyang have contributed significantly to the thriving of a national industry. The lasting dilemma, however, is that these industries are not physically based in Heyang. Out-migration comes with costs, which are paid at the level of the individual migrant, their household, and the entire village's social and financial infrastructure. The growing unsustainability and increased unpredictability of these industries challenged many villagers to reconsider their livelihood strategies, only to be confronted with few other options. This reveals the weak economic and industrial base of the village. Therefore, the state driven effort to build a 'Xiangchou Tourism' industry is part of a desire to promote locally based industries. Yet, as the stories of the five who worked in the tourism demonstrate, they may have enough *xiangchou* for Heyang to make them ready and willing to return, but opportunities within the village and its 'Xiangchou Tourism' enterprise was not yet enough to keep locals thriving in Heyang in the longer run.

Perhaps, the Heyang truly is a place of and for *xiangchou*. In fact, as I discussed in chapter 2, the village's very naming and formation was an act of *xiangchou* by the apical Zhu ancestors, who named this unknown settlement 'Heyang' as a tribute to their own hometown of Xinyang in Henan, a place they longed for but could never return to. Perhaps, the very idea of the 'Heyang identity' is imbued with homesickness and a concern for the loved ones who were left or who had left. If *xiangchou* means a combination of nostalgic reminiscence, homesickness, and an overall concern for the countryside, then all migrant-sending communities across China's rural landscape are constituted by *xiangchou*. Indeed, although most were pushed or forced out of their host cities, traces of *xiangchou* underline migrants' often bittersweet return to their hometown, a necessary journey that has so far helped sustain what is now evidently an unsustainable model of development, which, to reiterate, has depended upon production in the

cities but human reproduction in the countryside. Perhaps, *xiangchou* is an affect that helps tether the hundreds of thousands of migrants to their rural hometowns, and even the entire Chinese nation to its rural roots. Whereas this chapter explored the embeddedness of migration and the immanence of *xiangchou* in Heyang, the following chapter explores the discursive usage of *xiangchou* in the local state's recent efforts to encourage the return of migrants to their hometowns.

## Chapter 5. Rural Return: Xiangchou in an era of ‘Crises’

For China – and shortly thereafter, for the rest of the world – the new decade opened with one of the most panic-inducing public health crises of the era: the outbreak of COVID-19, a novel coronavirus with an alarmingly high human-to-human transmission rate. The verdict is still out on whether the Chinese state did enough to prevent the mass spread of the virus, as its outbreak coincided with China’s Spring Festival, a time where the world’s largest annual human migration takes place. By the end of January, most regions across the country were under various degrees of lock-down, some to keep people in, and others to keep people out. About 720km away from Wuhan, where the virus reportedly originated, Jinyun also instituted quarantine rules. In the county seat, everyone was to stay within their neighbourhoods and only one person per household was allowed to leave every other day for groceries and other necessities. Meanwhile, makeshift roadblocks stood at the entryway of villages to discourage anyone from leaving or entering. Heyang too was ordered to close itself off, and citizens were advised to stay indoors and forego any of the holiday gatherings and rituals that usually take place around this time. Notably, the deeply-rooted cultural tradition of *bainian* 拜年, where one pays visit to friends and extended family members, was replaced by the sending of virtual red envelopes and greeting messages via WeChat. Instead of the bustling New Year energy that literally brings life back into the otherwise sleepy ancient village, this year, it seemed that things were even quieter than normal, when over half of the population is usually away from home.

Fortunately, before COVID-19 officially put China in a state of emergency, most of Heyang’s migrants had already returned to their respective homes in time for the Spring Festival. In Heyang, they were counted and accounted for. Moreover, with the longstanding rural tradition of preparing a bounty of long-lasting foodstuffs for the weeklong celebrations and

feasts, every household was stocked with plenty of food to last what would become a prolonged period of quarantine. Most importantly, they were shielded from the virus, which never did manage to penetrate the village's ancient walls. In fact, the entire prefectural city of Lishui only had 17 confirmed cases.<sup>52</sup> Unfortunately, however, despite what became an 'extended holiday' with family, spirits must have tumbled as quickly as the global stock markets. Most were well aware that they would eventually emerge from the crisis unemployed and/or leave Heyang only to face the complete devastation of their livelihood and enterprises, many of which were still entangled in the already precarious and volatile industries of duck breeding and shrimp farming.

### 5.1. Introduction

In the previous chapter, I discussed the embeddedness of migration as well as the immanence of *xiangchou* in Heyang. This chapter is about the materialization of *xiangchou* as a discourse to encourage 'rural return' in the late 2010s. I define this period as an 'era of crisis,' and it encompasses the acute public health crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the deeper, more long-term crises of the 'urban disease' (*chengshibing* 城市病) and the 'three-rural issue' (*sannongwenti* 三农问题) of: farmers, countryside and agriculture. Indeed, capital overaccumulation, ecologically damaging practices, and the unequal distribution of resources have resulted in landscapes of extremes – from heavily congested cities and dangerously overcrowded 'urban slums,' to the haunting reality of ghost towns and the abandonment of entire villages. Caught in between these dual processes of overaccumulation and underdevelopment are China's massive army of migrant laborers, a subjectivity that is constantly shuffling in between the empty and the overflowing. They supply the labor to build

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<sup>52</sup> These figures were accurate as of December 29, 2020. This data was retrieved from <https://feiyang.wecity.qq.com/wuhan/dist/index.html#/>.

or service a node of accumulated capital, yet they are the first to be removed or relocated when their labor is needed elsewhere or when their labor is considered as surplus. The introduction of the Rural Revitalization Strategy in 2017 indicated that the need to rebalance capital, both human and financial, across the urban-rural spectrum became a national imperative. This urgency was especially captured in the first of the five ‘major tasks’ of the Rural Revitalization Strategy, known as ‘Thriving Industries,’ *chanyexingwang* 产业兴旺, which brought to light the importance of a strong rural workforce – and in many instances, the need to *rebuild* this workforce. Within such a context, I combine discourse analysis with findings from fieldwork to illustrate how *xiangchou* was strategically deployed to encourage return-migration and returnee-entrepreneurship by reframing the countryside – the dearly missed *home* – as a place for migrant labor to feasibly and comfortably return to.

To fully illustrate the effects of national-level policy and state discourse on communities at lower levels of China’s combined administrative and settlement hierarchies, this chapter focuses on a ‘meso-level’ of Xinjian township. Specifically, I analyse a letter penned by the township government that was specifically addressed to its shrimp farming and duck breeding households during the global public health crisis of COVID-19. I illustrate how this letter was an emotional plea to encourage these typically out-migrated households to not only remain in their hometowns after the ‘return to normalcy’ in the pandemic’s wake, but to seek employment in the township’s new clusters of factories and other new rural industries, many of which had only recently been established under the Jinyun County’s ‘Xiangchou Industries’ plan. Although this letter was written to appease the fears during this episode of acute crisis, I situate it in the broader context of the 2010s to argue that its central message cohered with the central government’s mission of encouraging rural return. I then turn to explore the case of a Mr. Tang,

an entrepreneur who heeded this call. Drawn back to Xinjian by his personal *xiangchou* for his home-village, he became the owner of a sprawling factory that he claimed was in the business of ‘producing *xiangchou*,’ and which employed villagers from nearby as well as migrant labor from further afar. Within the purview of local adaptations of the national ‘Thriving Industries’ initiative, I use Mr. Tang as an example to explore not only how the language of *xiangchou* was used to ‘sell rurality’ as desirable, but also to highlight that the assembly lines of these ‘Xiangchou Industries’ employed rural labour.

## **5.2. Herding the Ducklings Home: A Letter from the Xinjian Township Government**

On February 19, 2020, the Xinjian Township Government issued an emotional letter to everyone within its jurisdiction through its public WeChat account. This was at the peak of China’s nationwide lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the letter aimed to appease the genuine fears of the populace. Interestingly, while it was a message of hope to all, it specifically addressed its out-migrated population, and even more specifically, it called to its large army of duck and shrimp farmers. Entitled, “If one can return home, why venture far?: A letter to Xinjian’s out-migrated farming and livestock breeding households,” the government’s intention for penning this message was immediately clear – it was an attempt to encourage migrants, who were still quarantined in the area at the time, to remain in their respective hometowns, *laojia* 老家.

The letter was a heartfelt reminder to its out-migrated households of their arduous separations from the home-soil; it was a direct appeal to their *xiangchou*. At the same time, it was also a *strategic* plea to migrants to consider working locally. That is, instead of returning to their respective enterprises when the national lockdown would eventually be lifted, the government wrote to encourage migrants to remain in their hometowns and fill the jobs that

were occupied by those who had, conversely, migrated *to* Xinjian and were still quarantined in their respective hometowns during the pandemic. This is evidenced by the following passage:

factories are gradually resuming their operations, [however] because of the impact of the pandemic, a portion of migrants are unable to return to their posts, and these enterprises are facing shortages [...] especially in the Stationery Industry micro-hub that was just built this year... this is a great opportunity. (The People's Government of Xinjian Township, Jinyun County, 2020)

Here, the state is not only expressing concern over the labor-shortage in factories, but it also invites locals to view these unoccupied posts as an employment opportunity, that, importantly, would enable them to stay home. Overall, the letter is short, adorned with a baby pink border, and, to make this invitation to return more compelling, it is composed of simplistic language with a generous sprinkling of screenshots that, still retaining their original captions and a noticeable Tencent<sup>53</sup> watermark, appeared to have been taken from a promotional video for the county. Beneath the opening paragraph of the letter, readers are shown two images portraying scenes from Heyang. The first features a darkened silhouette of an elderly woman sitting alone on a traditional bamboo chair looking out into the courtyard of one of Heyang village's ancient dwellings. Beneath her is the caption: "Those left behind are the elderly and children." The second image is of a small boy with furrowed brows and a curious expression that could be read as distress. Wearing a Mickey Mouse t-shirt, he is sat alone on a stone ledge out front a wooden door panel that opened into darkness. Beneath him, the caption reads: "Day after day, [they] await the return from those afar" (The People's Government of Xinjian Township, Jinyun County, 2020).

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<sup>53</sup> Tencent Holdings Ltd. is one of China's largest and technology and multimedia conglomerates. It owns and operates the lions' share of products and services related to the internet in the country, including the social media and mobile payment platform, WeChat (see <https://www.tencent.com/en-us>).

The state's inclusion of these photos leveraged the guilt, heartache, and both the physical and emotional labor embedded in hearts and psyche of the migrants who have had to separate from their loved ones. Meanwhile, for the ones remaining in the countryside due to such household arrangements, the long and short term psychological and physiological impacts that result from this separation and isolation are writ onto the silhouette of the old woman and the face of the young boy.<sup>54</sup> The text below confirm their subjectivities as the *liushou* 留守 – those who are not necessarily “left-behind,” as this term is frequently interpreted in Western literature, but those who are more aptly described by Xiang Biao (2006) as “those who stay and hold down the fort;” indeed, they are the ones who “are waiting for migrants to return” (p. 181). Before reaching the bulk of the text, themes of homesickness and of *xiangchou* are already plentiful, and only to further drive this message home, the following is written:

A difficulty, this is. A challenge, it is also. But even more, this is an opportunity. This pandemic has brought to you all a moment of crisis [*weiji* 危机], but it has also brought to you an opportunity for a career change. Back then you hesitated on the decision to return; yet now is the most opportune moment to choose to come home. (The People's Government of Xinjian Township, Jinyun County, 2020)

### 5.2.1. The ‘Big City Disease’

If it was John F. Kennedy who famously equated the Chinese term for crisis, *weiji*, to mean “opportunity in danger,” then it was also the 35<sup>th</sup> US President who “led many astray” by popularizing what Victor H. Mair (2009) calls a “curious specimen of alleged oriental wisdom” (para. 1). In other words, “opportunity in crisis” is a famously inaccurate interpretation of the Chinese term. Nevertheless, there is a reason for the proverb’s popularity, and as far as the

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<sup>54</sup> For the mental health impacts on “left behind children,” see for instance Cheng & Sun, 2015; Han, Zhao, Pan, & Liao, 2018; Wu, Qu, Wang, Tang, & Sun, 2019; and for issues of physical and mental health in the “left behind elderly,” see for instance Lin, Yin, & Loubere, 2014; and Evandrou, Falkingham, Qin, & Vlachantoni, 2017.

Xinjian government was concerned, there was an opportunity to be sought in not only the legitimate fears surrounding this public health crisis to keep returnees in their hometown, but there was also opportunity to be sought in the broader developmental and demographic crises that had resulted from years of unfettered urban biased development to, ultimately, bring its labor force back. If COVID-19 was the crisis, then *xiangchou* became the means to articulate and realize the opportunity to bring and keep migrants home.

If anything, the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 served as a humbling reminder of the limitations of human activity and a troubling reminder of the extremes to which environments and resources have been stretched to accommodate certain forms and scales of development. In the context of not only China, but in the short history of industrialization and urbanization across the globe, it is no secret that episodes of fervent development have taken place at the expense of ecological balance, environmental integrity, and biosafety; with the greyness that smothered the United Kingdom during its industrial revolution in the 18<sup>th</sup> century being one of the earliest iterations of this reality, but also the most reflected upon examples of the ability to rectify the damage. Over three centuries later, China found itself in the global spotlight of environmental concern. As it emerged to take on the title of the ‘world’s factory,’ China also overtook the United States in 2006 as the world’s biggest producer of carbon dioxide emissions, with ramifications that extended far beyond its own airspace, borders, and shores (Vidal & Adam, 2007; Liu & Diamond, 2005). Although China made both symbolic and tangible efforts to decrease its environmental impact – such as ratifying the Paris Agreement in 2016 and fulfilling its target to reduce its CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by 46% “three years ahead of schedule” (UNFFC, 2018) – by the 2010s, it was concerns about urban overcrowding and other ailments related to rapid industrialization and *state-led urbanization* that became overriding for China’s city planners.

So much, that the concept of the “Big City Disease,” *dachengshibing* 大城市病, even appeared in state media on numerous occasions throughout the decade to describe what the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) termed the “Four Big Diseases,” *sidabingzhuang* 四大病状, of: 1) “thinning air syndrome,” which points to the degradation of air quality; 2) “intestinal obstruction,” which refers to the severe congestion of roadways; 3) the deterioration of city environments; and, 4) the severe over-extension and abuse of city resources (CASS, 2014). These issues were especially pronounced in megacities such as Shanghai and Beijing, whose permanent populations<sup>55</sup> swelled to 24 million and 21.7 million by the end of 2015, respectively. Plagued by the four horsemen of the “Big City Disease,” authorities in both cities included population caps as part of their developmental plans. According to Liyan Qi (2016) for the *Wallstreet Journal*, authorities in the country’s capital resolved “to keep greater Beijing’s population under 23 million and to shrink the urban center by 15% by 2020” (para. 5), while a report in *Reuters* (2017) indicated a population capped at 25 million by 2035 as the goal for Shanghai.

What must be acknowledged, however, is that within these 2015 figures, the population of permanent migrants accounted for 8.2 million in Beijing and 9.82 million in Shanghai. While they were counted into these population tallies, they were also those whose wellbeing and livelihood were completely unaccounted for in the often-brutal evictions, demolitions, and forced relocations of peoples that resulted from these top-down efforts of population control. From the sudden bulldozing of migrant housing, to the demolition of entire migrant communities, and to the shut-down of factories and strategic relocation of jobs, tens of thousands of migrants were suddenly and forcibly subject to evictions from their host cities

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<sup>55</sup> “Permanent” refers to peoples who live in the city for at least six months.

throughout the mid to late 2010s (Rivers & Wang, 2017; Zhou W. , 2015). These incidents drew much public scrutiny from citizens across the country, many of whom took to their keyboards and social media feeds to express their outrage. In fact, Rivers and Wang (2017) even detail how, “[i]n a rare move, more than 100 prominent Chinese intellectuals circulated an open letter online, criticizing the forced evictions” (section 2, para. 2). Similarly, after a deadly fire that killed 19 people in an industrial region in Beijing, Andrew Browne (2017) observed how authorities’ response to the tragedy was to “flatten migrants’ dilapidated dwellings and expel the capital’s most vulnerable inhabitants” (para. 4). Browne further details how “the plight of tens of thousands of refugees, dragging their wheeled suitcases through rubble in subzero temperatures, struck a chord among Beijing’s middle classes” (para. 7). Some of these sympathizers even took a further step to donate blankets, foodstuffs, and other supplies to these vulnerable migrant groups who were instantly dispossessed and displaced overnight, and who had no choice but to return to their rural hometowns. Rivers and Wang (2017) argue that the issue of migrant evictions was so hotly discussed amongst China’s ever-expanding middle class largely because of the understanding that the average migrant worker formed the very group of “people who not only helped build Beijing, but make sure that its day-to-day needs are met” (section 4, para. 1).

However, in addition to sympathy, the absence of migrants also incited feelings of disgruntlement from those of the middle and upper classes, as some felt it was their own lives that were disrupted and inconvenienced. Indeed, as China has attempted to transition from export-led industrialization to a consumption-based model of development, the service industry has boomed and further multiplied with the growing sophistication of digital platforms. Just like how China’s manufacturing industries relied on the exploitation of cheap migrant labor along

Fordist assembly lines, it was also upon the backs of migrants and their scooters that the rapid and instant lifestyles of the contemporary urbanites were enabled. In other words, the taken-for-granted convenience and low costs of lightning food and parcel delivery services faced massive delays and price hikes during labor shortages, which by and large resulted from instances where migrants – who made up 90% of Beijing’s couriers in 2015 (Rivers & Wang, 2017) – were no longer able, willing, or even present to accommodate these modern urban demands (see also Clover, 2015; H. Liu, 2017). Writing on migrants’ vulnerabilities during the pandemic and ensuing containment responses in Singapore, Shona Loong (2020) articulates how “COVID-19 lays bare the relationships that sustain us” (section 5, para. 1). In Beijing and Shanghai in this mid-to-late 2010s milieu, it was the deteriorated qualities of cities, the ensuing evictions of migrants, their more bitter-than-sweet returns to their often-barren hometowns, and the disruptions to the city’s services that laid bare the structural inequalities that sustained China’s urban-biased development.

Meanwhile, it was also during this period where feelings of burnout and disillusionment with ‘modern urban life’ were increasingly articulated on various popular platforms. These manifestations of ‘urban maladies’ grew in tandem with the tangible ‘urban diseases,’ creating for many a form of existential crises not at all dissimilar to what Clay Routledge (2018) describes as an existential “crisis of meaninglessness” experienced in 21<sup>st</sup> century America. These sentiments grew alongside, if not, produced a sense of escapist idealization towards the countryside. Contrasted with the fatigue and burnout associated with the cities, it was villages like Heyang that were portrayed as ‘down to earth,’ ‘clean,’ and, possibly, more habitable – whether as a temporary escape, or as a longer-term option. Of course, rural tourism comes immediately to mind as a consumable form of ‘escape,’ and by the 2010s, rural tourism had

become a very sophisticated and profitable industry within mainland China. While the government has had a heavy hand in encouraging rural tourism from the standpoint of development, what has also helped shape the landscape of tourism is the changing desires and needs within consumers' 'inner landscapes.' The yearning for 'rural escapes,' especially in conjunction with the booming 'wellness' industry, is also being materialized through 'health-oriented' experiences. These desires reflect a broader sociological condition of anxiety, depression, and mental health challenges addressed in such works as Yang Jie's *Mental Health in China* (2017), and Li Zhang's *Anxious China* (2020), among many others. The city, in particular, has become the site for much of these anxieties, and it is also the city's separation from nature and the oppression of the constructed environment that is culpable for modern distresses as well. For instance, Jie Yang (2017) describes smog-depression, *wumaiyiyuzheng* 雾霾抑郁症, as a form of mental health ailment endemic in major Chinese cities. This is a change in the atmosphere that is "human-driven, caused by large-scale industrial activities, often unfettered by inadequate environmental regulation, sometimes intensified by corruption" (Yang, 2017, Chapter 2, p. 11). It is an anthropogenic disturbance that is *felt and experienced* through body and mind. According to Jie Yang (2017), sufferers of this form of depression have even driven up demand for eco-therapy treatments and eco-tourism, which is part and parcel of an 'inner-revolution' described by Li Zhang (2020) amidst an observable 'psy-boom.' With or without the guidance of a practiced psychologist, one iteration of eco-therapy is a form of wellness retreat where patients become tourists as they participate in a short-term getaway in remote areas where they can immerse themselves in nature, play with farm animals, or even engage in forms of low-impact agricultural work. This is similar to the spirit and ethos behind *shinrin-yoku* 森林浴, or 'forest-bathing,' first introduced in Japan and increasingly popularized

in recent years in the Western world as well.<sup>56</sup> In China, settings that become the site for such forms of treatment-based leisure are organic farms, mountainous resorts, and indeed, natural villages. In fact, many rural towns and villages in Jinyun have tried to capitalize on the budding industry of *liaoyanglyou* 疗养旅游, a subset of rural tourism focused on ‘wellness,’ and whose target clientele are the ‘spiritually ailing’ urbanites.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, rural escapes have also gone digital. This is evidenced especially by the boom and popularity of social media influencers, or Key Opinion Leaders (KOL), whose content focus solely on selling the supposed ‘rural experience.’ One of the most known and discussed among these KOL is Li Ziqi 李子柒, who, in four years’ time, has amassed an army of hundreds of millions of ‘followers’ within China and beyond. To emphasize, Li even set a Guinness World Record for the most-subscribed-to Chinese language Youtube channel on July 16, 2020, a record which she easily broke again on January 25, 2021 having reached 14.1 million subscribers and counting (Zhan, 2021). Both at home and abroad, Li has translated her viral fame into a full-fledged company that includes her own brand of food, clothing, and other beauty and homeware representative of “traditional Chinese culture,” which, in this case, is intertwined with a highly aestheticized “rural culture.” Chen Dan 沈丹, better known by her moniker of ‘Xiangchou 乡愁’ on the short-video platform *douyin* 抖音, has also emerged into the limelight

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<sup>56</sup> Notably, the recognition of *shinrin-yoku* as an official therapeutic ‘practice’ coincided with the official recognition of *karōshi* 過勞死, “death by over-work,” as a major sociological phenomenon. According to Atsuko Kanai (2009), *karōshi* was a term coined in the 1980s prior to Japan’s ‘bubble-economy,’ but persists to this day due to a deeply engrained work culture that encourages and prefers long workhours. Kanai (2009) cites numerous early sources including Hosokawa et al., (1982) who defined the term as a “condition of being permanently unable to work or dead [...] by excessive work overload” (Hosokawa et al., 1982, cited in Kanai, 2009, p. 209), as well as The National Defense Council for Karoshi Victims, which characterized the term as a “fatal condition in which the living rhythm of a human being is collapsed due to excessive fatigue and the life maintenance function is ruined” (The National Defense Council for Karoshi Victims, 1989, cited in Kanai, 2009, p. 209). In China, the term *guolaosi* 过劳死 is a direct adaptation from the Japanese concept, and it emerged in prominence in the 2010s when more attention was paid to the issue of work-stress related deaths in the country. ‘996.ICU’ (discussed in chapter 6, p. 207) can be seen as a permutation of this concept as well.

in recent years. She describes her account, which currently has nearly 19 million followers and over 180 million ‘likes’ across her 230 short-videos, as “using a small lens to capture real life in the countryside.” Another KOL is Dianxi Xiaoge 滇西小哥, who has amassed over 11 million fans within and beyond mainland China through videos that showcase food and cooking in her rural hometown. Although there are distinct and notable differences in the three influencers’ content and audience base, the elements of escapism are embedded in their appeal. This is exemplified by a recent comment on one of Li’s videos from August 2021, which writes:

This is the true ‘spark’ of our human world; the lifestyle that we strive towards finds us in the bustling city, but we have lost the true meaning of living. I have also yearned to return to a life like this, to retreat to the mountains and forests and to the pastoral. I’ve grown tired of the hustle and bustle of the cities. The beauty of the nature is the freest form of living. (Yinchuan Ranfa Dikou Zaoxing Davie, 2021)

The appeal of the rural idyll is animated through mobile phone screens, satiating desires within various ‘inner landscapes’ that are yearning for some sort of reprieve from their respective ‘crises.’ The irony, however, is that much of rurality has been facing an existential crisis of its own.

### **5.2.2. The ‘Thorny’ Issue of Rurality**

Summarized as the ‘Three-Rural Issue’ (*sannongwenti* 三农问题) – the problems of agriculture, farmers, and rural areas – the ‘left behindness’ of rurality remains a thorn lodged deeply and stubbornly in the CCP’s developmental goals. Despite these idealized portrayals of the countryside, the very existence of many rural communities and their cultures were jeopardized throughout the 2010s. In fact, concern over the dilapidated state of various rural areas even produced an entire genre of “*xiangchou* literature” written by established scholars

who felt *xiangchou* – with an emphasis on the facets of ‘anguish’ and ‘homesickness’ – for their own rural hometowns. One of the most notable examples of such literature includes Liang Hong’s (2010) widely popular book, *Zhongguo Zai Liang Zhuang* 中国在梁庄. Liang’s work – a sociological and highly personal account of the development of her own hometown in Hubei – saw so much resonance within China because of how relatable it was to an entire generation of Chinese who also retained rural roots, and who could therefore feel personal connections to the people and the landscapes described in Liang’s book. For readers, including myself, it was as if they personally knew the elders, the migrants, the friends, the distant relatives, and that complex feeling of tenderness-regret-concern-and-comfort that swells in the heart and catches in the throat when seeing just how dilapidated the village from one’s childhood had become. That feeling is unmistakably *xiangchou*. In fact, so successful was Liang’s book that it has since been translated into English. It hit the Western markets in the summer of 2021 as *China in One Village*.

Ultimately, faced with the very real threat of public discontent from the masses across the urban-rural spectrum, the single-party state was also experiencing a crisis of its own, and of its own making. This was by and large the context that prompted the introduction of the Rural Revitalization Strategy in 2017, unveiled alongside Xi Jinping’s ascent into his second term of presidency and his accompanying pledge to fulfill the CCP’s two centenary goals of achieving a “moderately prosperous society” by 2021, and to become a “strong, democratic, civilized, harmonious, and modern socialist country” by 2049 (Xinhua, 2017). As I detailed in Chapter 3, (p. 108), existing poverty stood in the way of achieving a “moderately prosperous society,” meaning that Xi’s legitimacy as China’s ‘paramount leader’ and the Party’s legitimacy as the ideological guidepost of the country depended, first and foremost, on the eradication of rural

poverty by 2021.

To be sure, China's achievements in poverty alleviation since the reform era are already well documented and acknowledged by harsh critics and supporters alike. However, the rural poor was a thorn that could seemingly puncture the party's delicately inflated image in the eyes of the entire populace at any moment. In fact, the plight of the countryside was anything but new, and there is continuity in the Xi administration's concern over mass discord in the late 2010s with the rural protests that erupted at the turn of the new century. In the mid 1980s, peasant livelihood was squeezed dry under a system dubbed by Kathy Le Mons Walker (2006) as "gangster capitalism," wherein the illicit "marriage" between money and power caused tremendous social and financial suffering in the countryside. From increased tax payments to apportionments, the peasantry's financial hardship during this period was characterized as the "peasant burden," which, according to Xiaobo Lu (1997), was an issue that was "serious enough that the government worrie[d] about [the] potential widespread rural unrest" that it could cause (p. 117). Over two decades, that "potential unrest" translated into multiple episodes of "protest, resistance, and outright insurgency" (Walker, 2006, p. 6). The burden of the peasantry, as well as the burden that it caused on the state's precious need to maintain order and stability "reached new levels of intensity" in 1993, a year that saw "6 uprisings in nearly a dozen of China's 21 provinces and several thousand casualties" (Walker, 2006, pp. 6-7). Suffice it to say, these incidents remain as painful reminders to the CCP that the plight of the countryside cannot be ignored.

Although the peasantry is no longer facing similar forms of extraction because of taxation and fiscal reforms undertaken in 2004 to 2006, they are very much still 'burdened' in other ways, and the emergence of the subjectivity of the migrant laborer demonstrates how their

burden does not begin and end in the countryside. In fact, it is no longer just the peasantry nor just the countryside that are carrying the ‘burdens of development.’ Wedged between the Four Big Diseases felt in China’s urbanity, and the pervasive Three-Rural Issue that underscored the hardships particular to China’s rural areas and rural people since the early 2000’s, the state’s credibility was burdened and threatened by a looming crisis of legitimacy. The need for ‘rural return’ became urgent, as there was recognition of a need to not only revive and salvage China’s natural and habited environments, but also to address the major socio-cultural disparities between urban excess and rural depletion through the encouragement of not only skilled and unskilled migrants but also other entrepreneurs and their capital to flow (back) into the countryside. It was within this juncture where I observe a potential turning point and its related imperatives. And as I now turn to detail, *xiangchou* becomes a way through which to articulate and mobilize the needs and desires for rural return.

### **5.2.3. A ‘Crisis of Legitimacy:’ Appealing to *Xiangchou* to Narrow the Urban-Rural Divide**

Almost immediately after the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress and the release of the Rural Revitalization Strategy – which is broken down into achieving the five ‘major tasks’ of “thriving industries,” “pleasant living environments,” “rural traditions and civilization,” “effective governance,” and “prosperous lives” – numerous articles appeared on state-authorized websites and in academic circles relating ‘rural revitalization’ to *xiangchou*. *Xiangchou* was especially useful in coloring the language of the first and supposedly most foundational task of achieving “Thriving Industries.” For instance, an article penned by Liu Ying and Yi Changdong (2019) entitled, “Let ‘*Xiangchou* Power’ Become the ‘New Force’ for the Revolution of Industry” speak of a so-called “*xiangchou* power” (*xiangchouliliang* 乡愁力量) as a “reservoir of energy”

(*yuandongneng* 源动能) for rural revitalization. This article was published under a provincial research institute in Guizhou dedicated to research on ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics,’ and was further disseminated by other media and state-affiliated outlets including the CASS.

Analogous to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, “Thriving Industries” is considered by the central government as ‘foundational’ to the Rural Revitalization Strategy as it directly concerns the livelihood of rural residents and of income and employment in the countryside. It homes in on the productive capabilities of rural economies, and the policies, projects, and funds created beneath its umbrella aim to funnel resources into primary industries where necessary and in secondary and tertiary industries where possible. In doing so, the task of ensuring that rural businesses can thrive also brings to bear the importance of a strong rural workforce and the need to rebuild this workforce with entrepreneurs, skilled and unskilled labor, academics and other ‘experts,’ student volunteers, and investors. The language of *xiangchou* is salient in articles pertaining to “Thriving Industries” because of its affective qualities that invoke homesickness, concern, and nostalgia, which, according to an article by Liu Qi, is essential to bringing people ‘home.’ Liu’s article, entitled, “Fully Realize the Power of the People in Rural Revitalization,” was disseminated in 2019 through the China Institute for Rural Studies at the prestigious Tsinghua University. At the time of publication, he served as the incumbent Party Secretary of Jiangxi Province. His article outlined seven different affective “forces” that would compel and mobilize various segments of society into rural revitalization efforts. Third on his list was none other than *xiangchou*, which he describes as both a driving force for revitalization, and a necessary quality of the Chinese nation to be *retained*. In his words:

The Chinese nation is the nation with the deepest sentiment of *xiangchou* in the world; everyone has *xiangchou*. *Xiangchou* is not only an emotion, but it can also produce tremendous strength, to become a critical booster in the task of rural revitalization. A

large number of elites who have come out of the countryside have all had the lingering dream of “leaving home young but returning home old.” They have an inseparable attachment to the countryside where they were born and raised. (Liu Q. , 2019)

The *xiangchou* that Liu speaks of is at once personal – that is, harbored at the level of individuals – and civilizational. In the excerpt above, Liu references a famous Tang Dynasty poem by scholar-official He Zhizhang 贺知章 (659-744AD) entitled, *Huixiangoushu* 回乡偶书, commonly translated as “Homecoming,” but which can be literally translated as “returning to my home village, impromptu writing.” He wrote this poem in his 80’s upon receiving Emperor Xuanzong’s blessing to return to his hometown after nearly fifty years of servitude in the imperial court. The poem depicts how He returned with greyed hair, but his hometown accent remained the same. It conveys nostalgic reminiscence and the simultaneous (un)familiarity of the hometown that He’s return evoked. In a way, this is the same language of *xiangchou* invoked through Liang Hong’s *China in One Village*.

Interestingly, Liu’s (2019) reference to the poem also highlights a facet of class. That is, by highlighting in particular the *xiangchou* of political and cultural elites, Liu speaks almost of a *moral duty* for those who have found success to return and to ‘give back’ to their hometowns. This is further expressed as he continues to write:

As long as conditions permit, most will choose to return to their roots, return to the soil of their hometown. [They will] deploy their skills and knowledge and will bring the most advanced developmental visions and technologies back to their hometowns to become a support system for rural society and an important force to push forth rural revitalization. Ever since ancient times, it was predominantly through the contributions of elites that has retained the historical and cultural legacies of the countryside. The *guminju* of Wannan, the Shanxi Courtyard Houses, the manors of Xianggan, and so forth, these have all precipitated from the rural nostalgia of these successful people who have gone out. Today, many retired cadres, scientists, and cultural practitioners all harbor a deep sense of *xiangchou* in their hearts. They hope to use their remaining years to dedicate themselves to their hometowns, to give back to the soil that raised them.

Himself a high-ranking member of the CCP, Liu goes on to acknowledge that there remained several hurdles preventing the return of these elites. He includes the household registration system and the rural homestead system as such barriers, as well as a lack of social infrastructure including adequate health care systems. However, he then explains how the Party had already raised several policy recommendations in the central government's "No. 1 Document" in 2018 precisely to overcome these barriers, which are preventing these 'desires to return' amongst cadres, retirees, and other 'productive' members of society. He details the central government's policy recommendations for local states in the following:

The 2018 "No. 1 Document" has already suggested related policies: establish effective incentive mechanisms that utilize *xiangchou* as a lasso to attract and encourage entrepreneurs, party cadres, researchers and academics, doctors and teachers, planners and architects, lawyers, and various other skilled talent to serve the revitalization of rural industries as volunteers, by investing in businesses, to contract rural projects, to practice medicine and run schools, to donate money and other goods, and to provide legal services and so on. The floodgates of policy have already been opened to promote the flow of those with *xiangchou* from city to countryside, and to build for them the conditions to retain their *xiangchou*, let their *xiangchou* establish roots in the soil. This is the most powerful driving force for rural revitalization. (Liu Q. , 2019)

In effect, Liu (2019) uses official language as a way to frame *xiangchou* as a compelling reason for elites to not only return to their rural hometowns, but also to take up the call for revitalization by providing their own resources and skills to build up the very social and financial infrastructure that, if lacking, would otherwise hinder the return of other urban(ized) elites. In this way, *xiangchou* is envisioned as the 'lynchpin' between the urban(ized) and the rural; a call to action; and an emotional cord that tethers those who have left to the literal or figurative 'home-village.'

#### 5.2.4. Re-situating the ‘Chinese Dream’ in the Countryside

In addition to being ‘mobilizing,’ *xiangchou* is also employed as a demonstrative discourse to qualify and quantify rural revitalization ‘in action.’ A quick search of *xiangchou* alongside keywords including ‘revitalization’ (*zhenxing* 振兴) and ‘industry’ (*chanye* 产业) produces numerous examples of state-propagated articles that speak of tangible changes brought about by rural revitalization efforts, many of which are regional case studies to ‘showcase’ the success of the revitalization efforts of specific villages or counties – in other words, it is the materialization of *xiangchou* through tangible measures and features of change. Writing about Huamao Village (花茂村) for the provincial newspaper of Guizhou, Luo Liangliang (2017) describes local development in the following manner:

This was once a place where chickens and ducks roamed free, where dust littered the sky, a rural backcountry. Now, it is a pastoral complex where one can ‘see mountains, gaze at waters, keep *xiangchou* in mind’ [...] On June 16, 2015, when President Xi came on an official visit to our Huamao village, he emotionally declared: ‘no wonder everyone wants to visit, I found ‘*xiangchou*’ here. (para. 3)

The language of *xiangchou* has become inseparable from not only tangible policies and projects for rural revitalization, but it has also become an important term that links the urban(ized) elite to the rural, the central to the local. It is a way for which local governments can even make direct claims of connection to Xi Jinping.

At the same time, just as the ‘Chinese Dream’ is touted as the ‘dream of the people,’ it is also the various personal *xiangchou* that makes up the nation’s *xiangchou*. In fact, whereas Liu’s article highlighted the necessary return of retired cadres and other ‘elites,’ a particularly optimistic (and propagandistic) post on the Central Government instead homes in on the return of unskilled migrants and farmers. Aptly entitled “Thriving Industries for Prosperity,” the article

features a synthesis of how local governments across the country were working hard to “reenergize rural industries” under the directives of the Rural Revitalization Strategy (China.org.cn, n.d.).<sup>57</sup> In particular, it provided a virtual tour across five different provinces “to see how the local governments help industries thrive” (China.org.cn, n.d., para. 1). From the application of big data to farming, to the incorporation of QR codes and e-commerce to the sale of agricultural products, and to the provision of workshops that teach planting skills to struggling farmers, each case study highlights the role that the local government, particularly the county government, played in not only boosting farmers’ confidence and livelihoods, but the article also conveys how they played a crucial role in *bringing migrants home*.

The article describes how Taiqian county government in Henan province helped welcome 3,367 migrant workers, especially farmers and those engaged in low-skilled labor, back to their hometowns. In turn, these return migrants started businesses that together “created new jobs for over 32,800 farmers and greatly revitalized the local economy” (China.org.cn, n.d., para. 56). At the time of the article’s publication, the county was said to be home to over 500 factories, most of which produced automobile parts (China.org.cn, n.d., para. 57). One factory featured in the article was reported to have received generous support from the local state, including help in procuring more land for expansion, as well as low interest loans and government allowances that amounted to 550,000 yuan (US\$84,851.86). The company reportedly pulled in an annual output value of 50 million yuan (US\$7.7 million) and employed 19 workers “from poor households who earn[ed] a monthly salary of 2,300 yuan [US\$354.84]” (China.org.cn, n.d., para. 59-60). This salary equalled the threshold of China’s poverty line of

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<sup>57</sup> China.org.cn is a government-authorized portal site for news and other information about China. It is published under the State Council Information Office and the China International Publishing Group in Beijing.

2,300 yuan per person, per month, and a line that was drawn based on price indices in 2010.

Moreover, the article also details how during the Spring Festival season of 2018, the Taiqian county government set up personnel service sites in train and bus stations – where migrant traffic would be extremely high – that promised to provide support and resources to “people who had the willingness to return home and start businesses” (China.org.cn, n.d., para. 69). The article further highlights the story of a man named Meng Qingchang, a migrant laborer from Taiqian who, whilst exiting the train station on his journey home for the holidays, was reportedly “intrigued by the banner of ‘Rural Vitalization’” that hung above the government service site. Meng’s experience of receiving government support to facilitate his return is paired with a direct quote from the returnee himself: “‘Thanks to the government, I am not a migrant worker anymore’” (China.org.cn, n.d., para. 69-72). Meng’s words of gratitude to the government are telling; He is portrayed as having been ‘relieved’ by the state from what was ultimately an undesirable role and highly disadvantaged social class of ‘migrant worker.’ The several cases listed in this article speak of empowering farmers and other rural citizens, but especially in Meng’s case, it portrays the idea of ‘returning back to the home-village’ as not only achievable, but also as *desirable*. Such discourse is almost a complete reversal from the notion of ‘making it in the city’ that has so far dominated the contemporary psyche of what it means to ‘succeed’ and be a modern citizen. It challenges the popular perception that the ‘Chinese Dream’ is meant to be found in the city. Indeed, the substance of this article as well as the government’s message relayed within it plays into the broader rise and prominence of *xiangchou* as a discourse and political economic tool to not only ‘rebrand’ the countryside and country’s agrarian roots, but also to ‘revalue’ *what it means to be a rural subject*. In other words, dreams can be realized in the countryside as well – and these dreams ‘belonged to’ homesick migrants such as Meng.

From another perspective, however, farmers like Meng are presented as ‘model farmers’ or ‘model return-migrants’ in a way that is discursively similar to the ways through which ‘model ethnic minorities’ have been portrayed in various fashions, such as ethnic tourism, wherein the dominant ethnic minority narrative depicts peaceful, jovial cooperation and national unity. In her article on the relationship and contradictions between the politics of representation and the politics of presence, for instance, Jenny A. Chio (2019) argues how the presence of ethnic minorities in prominent political forum succeeds in “perform[ing] significant symbolic work for the nation by offering a mainstream, dominant image of what political representation looks like for China’s ethnic minorities: a singular, attractive, and visually distinctive body who stands in for an unseen number of others” (p. 537). From the representatives of entire ethnic groups carefully selected to join the 19<sup>th</sup> National Congress, to the carefully choreographed performance of all 56 ethnic minority groups that open every single Spring Festival Gala, these highly performative ‘representations’ of ethnic difference play into the hegemonic narrative of the ‘happy family’ touted by the state. In a similar fashion, the image of ‘happy farmers’ and the successful ‘migrant-returns-to-riches’ stories emphasize the state’s role in alleviating rural poverty on the one hand, while, on the other hand, it also engenders a new ‘role’ for rural subjects as yet another form of labor to service and, indeed, salvage China’s economy.

From this perspective, the *utility* and underlying logic behind the state-led push for *urban to rural* migration illustrates another ‘function’ of both the countryside and the peasantry within the Chinese state’s overarching developmental goals. This is encapsulated by James T. Areddy (2020) when he writes:

China’s rural poor have been a tool of Communist Party strategy since Mao Zedong rallied them in his revolution, then herded them into communal farming, with disastrous results. Decades later, Deng Xiaoping sent them to urban construction sites and factories.

Mr. Xi is pressing them into service for a third time. To narrow the gulf between China's urban rich and rural poor, he is trying to populate rural towns with entrepreneurs and consumers. (para. 4)

Areddy (2020) helps further illuminate the ways through which changes at the macro-level can lead to the materialization of policy and the embedding of discourse with tangible impacts on the micro-levels of individuals' lived experiences as various, shifting collectives. Indeed, from the 'basin of revolution' to the 'reserve army of labor,' I argue that discourse of *xiangchou* is now helping to materialize another 'role' for the peasantry vis-à-vis China's ongoing revolution towards a 'modern socialist country,' and it illustrates a new 'function' of the countryside as a place to absorb excess capital.

That said, however, the peasantry and the countryside are not just passive 'tools' in the authoritarian Chinese state's agenda. Although such perspectives as Areddy's can make sense of the broader changes and developments within the Chinese state's developmental path, it is only one part of the narrative of an otherwise complex landscape of various national imperatives and personal and collective desires that can and often do overlap. Critically, more than merely top-down propaganda and a new political trope, the effectiveness of *xiangchou* lies in the fact that it is affective. As the following section discusses, *xiangchou* embodies a set of emotions that are held and felt by individuals from varying walks of life, and which manifests as varying forms of longing and desire that intersect in the figurative or literal landscape of 'rurality.' Although the example of Meng Qingchang is used to fulfill a top-down narrative of 'rural revitalization,' it is not wholly implausible that migrants like Meng do genuinely desire an opportunity to return; or, as commonly expressed by residents from migrant-sending communities such as Heyang, it is a deep-rooted desire to *huijia* 回家, 'go home.' As much as agency and individual or collective choices are shaped and influenced by culture and politics,

to re-invoke Burawoy (2008), it is also the ‘micro-processes’ – from seemingly mundane practices of ‘everydayness’ to individual desires – that can impact macro-forces, which in this case refers to a developmental ‘turning point’ that encourages ‘rural return.’

### **5.3. From Xinjian to Heyang: The Dilemma of “Xiangchou Industries”**

As if putting theory into practice, the Xinjian Township’s letter also deployed *xiangchou* as a ‘lasso’ to entice the return of both skilled and unskilled labor. At the same time that this was strategic, however, it was also effective because of its resonance with the lived experiences of migrants; migrants whose *xiangchou* could serve as the ‘reservoir of energy’ for revitalization. This is best exemplified in one of the main paragraphs of the letter, which writes:

Back then, you left with your backs turned to your native homes. You went out to hustle with the sole intention of returning to live a better life. Yet in the process, you’ve missed out on so much, too much: parents with illness did not receive your care; your loved ones shouldered the responsibility of childcare and elderly care on their own, and you had no way of sharing the burden; you looked at your child through the screen of your phone, yet you missed out on their growth. Back then, the hometown was too small, and it did not have the capacity to hold your dreams. (The People's Government of Xinjian Township, Jinyun County, 2020)

Moreover, the Xinjian Township government was also proactive in listing new industrial developments and employment opportunities that had recently become available locally. For instance, the letter states that the Jinyun county government invested much effort into building more ‘ecological industries,’ and it claims that across the county, there were 212 regulated enterprises, 3,000 small and medium enterprises, and 50,000 employed workers. This language and method of quantifying these ‘revitalization efforts’ is similar to the central government’s publication and its detailing of the Taiqian county governments achievements, analyzed above.

This section of the township's letter also emphasized how the environment and 'quality' of small towns and villages had improved, which the state suggested to mean that there was even more potential in terms of industrial growth and the proliferation of factories in these small towns and villages. The letter even specifically highlighted the success and growth of a cluster of factories and businesses that produce stationery and office supplies. As if to prove these claims, the two photos that came after this paragraph were images of rural factories, where middle-aged men and women are pictured operating small machinery and working on an assembly line. During my time in Xinjian, I was able to witness this very photo come to life.

### 5.3.1. The 'Fordist' Manufacturing of Xiangchou

I was fortunate to be able to speak with an owner and CEO of one of these stationery factories, Mr. Tang, who was introduced to me as a successful entrepreneur and a return migrant who was now 'doing *xiangchou* industries' *zuoxiangchouchanye* 做乡愁产业. Given the nature of my research, we had a mutual interest each other's work. He took me to his factory, which, at the time of our meeting around the 2019 Spring Festival, was only two years into its operation. It was a short 5-minute drive from Heyang's *guminju*, and it was a sprawling, multi-story building in a gated complex dedicated to cultural and creative industries, *wenchuangchanye* 文创产业. This gated industrial complex was also a new addition to the rural landscape. He explained to me how he saw the potential of industrial development in Xinjian, and how, at the time, there were favorable policies provided by the local governing bodies to support ventures like his and return-entrepreneurs like himself. His business model involved procuring stationery products in bulk – such as pencil cases, notebooks, tote bags, and tablet sleeves – and taking commissions from clients to customize the items with specific patterns and designs. The client, in turn, resells the customized products at an up marketed price on their respective e-commerce

platforms to be further disseminated into the hands of students and hip office workers in the wider Chinese market. As we toured his factory floor, Mr. Tang told me that he employed locals from nearby villages like Heyang as well as migrants from other parts of China to make the commissioned patterns on sewing machines or with simple printing presses. While I processed his words, my eyes homed in on the number of middle-aged women in their 40s-60s working on the third floor of his operation, where the machinery and assembly lines were. At the time, the labor force looked quite sparse, and I assumed this was due to the fact that most who had migrated to work here had returned to their respective hometowns for the Spring Festival. As for the women who were present, I noticed how they were dressed similarly to the women I would frequently encounter in Heyang during this time of year: a bulky puffer coat, the visible neckline of a wool turtleneck sweater, thick-soled shoes with an even thicker cotton lining, simple trousers over fleece-lined leggings that filled the gap where the hem of their trousers met the openings of their shoes, and, of course, the sleeves that one uses to cover the arms of their clothing when cooking or doing other forms of manual labor. Indeed, this is a configuration of clothing common in the more rural parts south of the Yangtze River in China, where, aside from individual air conditioning units, there is no indoor heating. “This is basically a *jiagongchang* 加工厂 [processing plant]” Mr. Tang explained, as we continued with the tour of his factory.

Although a processing plant, how and why Mr. Tang considered his factory a ‘business of *xiangchou*’ was because his ultimate ambition was to create designs and products that embody *xiangchou* and convey the “story of the countryside.” The specific wordings he used was *xiangchou* products (*xiangchouchanping* 乡愁产品), and “to transmit the story of the countryside outwards” (*banongcundegushichuandachuqu* 把农村的故事传达出去). As we sat down for tea in his office, he proceeded to tell me an emotional tale about his own experience

with out-migration at a young age, how he found success in the city as an entrepreneur, and, as he got older, how he personally felt *xiangchou* for his hometown, a small village near Heyang, also in Xinjian. Now in his 40s, he wanted to use his own wealth and business acumen to contribute back to his hometown by creating products that embody *nongcunyuansu* 农村元素 – “rural elements” or “elements of the countryside.” He had two visions for achieving this. The first was to collaborate with local government bodies such as the MC in Heyang to design and create, for instance, umbrellas, magnets, keychains, and tea sets that feature distinctive Heyang iconography. The target clientele for these products – which are essentially tourist memorabilia and souvenirs – would naturally be visitors to the *guminju*, and by extension, consumers who do not or no longer live in such a rural setting. He also mentioned that these products would appeal to people like himself who have left from their rural hometowns and would be, in his words, “very happy to have a product that expresses their own *xiangchou* for their *laojia*.” His second vision was to create his own unique design brand. What I found rather telling throughout his description of his envisioned brand was how he frequently used the terms *xiangchou* 乡愁, *nongcun* 农村, and *jianyue* 简约, “simple/minimalistic,” interchangeably. This indicated to me that *xiangchou* and ‘rurality’ meant to him a minimalistic *aesthetic*. In fact, this was confirmed when he said that he ultimately hoped to emulate something akin to the globally popular Japanese lifestyle brand, Muji, which is known for its elegant simplicity. What he considered to be his point of differentiation, was the infusion of “rural elements.” “People, like this kind of look, it’s easy, clean, and comfortable” he said, speaking about the global success and popularity of Muji. “The Chinese are good at copying stuff, but I want to create something that is uniquely our Chinese *xiangchou*” (Field Interview, January 9, 2019, Mr. Tang’s Factory).

### 5.3.2. ‘Capital Q Quality’ and ‘Capital X Xiangchou’

Whilst boasting about his production capabilities, he also admitted that he is still far from reaching his dream. At the time, his next actionable step was to search for a top-tier designer, who he planned to recruit from one of China’s first or second tier cities. “I want to produce quality, high-end products that embody *xiangchou*, I want to be able to showcase rural culture to people in the cities” he said. “I am a *tushengtuzhangdenongcunren* 土生土长的农村人 – [a person born and raised straight from the soil of the countryside] – and I want people in the cities to see the value of *nongcun* products.” During our conversation, I inquired about the linguistic difference between *tutechan* 土特产, rural specialties, and what he was describing as *xiangchou* products, *xiangchou chanpin* 乡愁产品. Before getting into his understandings of the two, it is worth first dissecting the term *tutechan* to provide more context into how rural products – indeed, how ‘rurality’ has become more commodified and consumed in the recent years, especially with the proliferation of China’s digital economy. Specifically, the term *tutechan*, uses the character ‘tu’ which translates literally to ‘dirt’ or the ‘earth.’ However, ‘tu’ also denotes denigrating characteristics of a ‘backward,’ ‘uncouth,’ ‘coarse,’ or, at best, a ‘humble’ countryside and/or person from the countryside. This becomes especially pronounced when it is used in tandem with its counterpart of ‘yang’ 洋, which connotes ‘modern’ and ‘Western.’ Indeed, ‘tu’ denotes an inferiority along multiple planes. When it is used to describe a person, it denotes a *civilizational difference* in class, etiquette, and cultural capital between rural and urban subjectivities, or even within these subjectivities. These differences in ‘human quality’ are encapsulated in the Chinese term, *suzhi* 素质 (see for instance Murphy, 2004; Anagnost 2004; Kipnis, 2006). According to Britta Ingebretson (2017), “[t]raits of *tu*-ness iconically index qualities of the peasant; dark, sun-damaged skin, a lack of education, and

nonstandard Mandarin” (p. 254). When applied to a person, qualities of ‘tu’ become visibly imprinted as what Yi Lin (2011) describes as “capital Q Quality” on the body in terms of their clothing, demeanor, and, indeed, in what is perceived to be their lower-*suzhi*, lower Quality (p. 322). In fact, ‘tu’ can even be used to qualify a person who has financial wealth but is still perceived to have low-*suzhi*. Ingebretson’s (2017) study on the *tuhao* 土豪 ‘rural rich’ provides a full discussion on the invocation of ‘tu’ in the subjectivity of a *tu-hao* versus the “high-quality citizen” as forms of “qualia,”<sup>58</sup> with the former embodying “coarseness” and the latter as “fineness” (p. 245). In her words, the qualia of ‘tu’ as a representation of being ‘coarse’ – and therefore, lacking in (re)fineness – helps to “organize preexisting cultural logics of difference [and] are thereby subsumed to the state project of quality-raising” (p. 243). Because of this, she argues that the “*tuhao* is not simply embarrassing, but is a major obstacle to shaping the rural Chinese workforce into the right type of modern subject” (Ingebretson, 2017, p. 244). By focusing on the *tuhao*, she demonstrates how one can be ‘wealthy’ and higher in class financially, however, the characteristic of being ‘tu’ still portrays a person of ‘lower-Quality.’ ‘*Tu*-ness’ is not only denigrating, but it is also inextricably tied to China’s rurality. Similarly, when applied to describing a rural place, ‘tu’ delineates a spatial, socioeconomic, and cultural inferiority between the urban and the rural (see for instance Park 2014; Xue, Kerstetter, & Hunt, 2017). Whereas, when applied to characterize items and their functionality or design, ‘tu’ highlights a difference in *taste*. Items qualified as ‘tu’ are considered outdated or outmoded. Even if the product has nothing to do with the actual, physical countryside, this ‘tu’ retains its roots in ‘rurality’ and its perceived backwardness.

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<sup>58</sup> Ingebretson (2017) invokes Nelson Goodman and Susan Gal in defining “qualia” as “embodied, conventional and hence experience-able forms of abstract qualities” (p. 245).

However, in the recent proliferation of the term *tu-techan* (rural/agricultural specialty), or similarly, *tu-chanpin* 土产品 (rural/agricultural product), the term ‘tu’ reverts to its more literal meaning of the earth or dirt. It means products that are ‘straight from the soil:’ they are natural, often organic, and thereby free of any modifications, chemicals, and synthetic elements that have been the cause of much controversy in many of China’s food safety scares in supermarkets located across Chinese cities. In fact, according to findings by the Pew Research Centre, 41% of surveyed respondents in China marked food safety as a major concern in 2012, compared to 12% in 2008 (Wike, 2013). In this light, ‘tu’ becomes a *positive quality*, and the farmer who is frequently pictured on e-commerce platforms alongside their ‘tu’ product is thereby viewed not as a ‘country bumpkin,’ but rather, the ‘honest worker who provides an honest product’ – a *capital Q Quality farmer* with his *capital Q Quality product* (see Chan & Enticott, 2019). Used in this context, ‘tu’ characterizes the more premium item, the item of *higher Quality*, in comparison to the produce sold in mass that, wrapped in cheap plastic, sit stagnant under the sterile fluorescent lighting of grocery stores. This discursive shift took place in parallel to the overall re-evaluation of the countryside as a tranquil, down to earth place to ‘sojourn,’ when the city, conversely, appeared too overwhelming and as a place less desirable, if only, temporarily.

How, then, does a *xiangchou* product differ from a product characterized as ‘tu’? Based on the insights that I gathered from my discussion with Mr. Tang and from my observations and research conducted elsewhere in and around the region, I argue that *tutechan* speak more specifically to agricultural products, such as tea, vegetables, and even Jinyun noodles, which, as a matter of fact, are often referred to locally as *tu-mian* 土面. As an aside, the ‘tu-ness’ of the local noodle, which are fully handmade using only local wheat variants, is further emphasized

by what people in Jinyun refer to as *yang-mian* 洋面, which indicates noodles that are machine made using flour from elsewhere. Therefore, this specific understanding of *tu-techan* indicates items that are produced and procured straight from the farmer and into the hands of the consumer, and which are now made immediately and readily accessible to urban consumers by the development of agricultural e-commerce and digital platforms that, in turn, have been instrumental in enhancing the livelihood of many farmers and agricultural communities across the country (see for instance Wang, Zhu, & Zhang, 2016; Zeng, Guo, Yao, & Huang, 2019). *Xiangchou* products, however, are not necessarily agricultural products or things ‘from the soil.’ Just as Mr. Tang explained, they speak more to an *aesthetic* that is inspired by elements drawn from a romanticized ideal of what rurality is or a representation – even an escapist portrayal – of a rural lifestyle. The budding supply and demand for *xiangchou* products include those sold by Li Ziqi, whose digital content and purchasable commodities centers on a ‘rural life’ that appears almost like a fairytale, (Wu V., 2019; Matei, 2020), and is anything but ‘tu’. This ‘marketplace’ for *xiangchou* – as both an escapist sentiment from the drudgery of ‘normal life’ in modern cities and as something that can now be consumed, either through digital content or through physical products – is one that Mr. Tang hopes to break into. “Maybe my line of items can even become exclusive and expensive collectors’ items,” said Mr. Tang, as he continued to describe his vision of his own brand of products that embody ‘capital X Xiangchou’ (Field Interview, January 9, 2019, Mr. Tang’s Factory).

At one point of our conversation, Mr. Tang pointed to a large piece of wood outside his factory. He explained to me how he took this from an old dwelling that was being renovated after years of neglect and decay in Heyang’s *guminju*, and how he intended to repurpose it into a designer chair. “You see, through this piece of wood, I could tell the story of Heyang. I think

it could be very expensive, I think even people like you, a *laowai* 老外 [foreigner] would like it, these rustic designs are popular overseas too, right?” (Field Interview, January 9, 2019, Mr. Tang’s Factory). Through my conversation with Mr. Tang and in witnessing his business operation, I saw a literal materialization of the *xiangchou* in ‘Xiangchou Industries.’ The purpose of *xiangchou* in this configuration is an aesthetic, or even a material rendering of form of desire for the ‘good life’ that is imagined to take place in quaint *siheyuan*. The role that the countryside plays in supporting this industry is, on the one hand, to serve as the inspiration for design, and, on the other hand, to provide the labor to fabricate the products that are ultimately targeted to an urban clientele, or a clientele that retains its rural roots but no longer necessarily identifies as ‘rural’ through various and unique processes of socialization. As I left his factory, with a new Muji-like laptop sleeve in hand, I thought about the women working on the assembly lines and wondered about the idea of *fuming* 富民, “enrich the people,” in the county’s grand vision of creating “*xiangchou* industries to enrich the people,” *xiangchoufumingchanye* 乡愁富民产业.

### 5.3.3. Rerooting the Uprooted: A Proletarianization Still Unfinished?

In the previous chapter, I mentioned how Heyang’s village head admitted to a lack of work and a lack of pay in Heyang. Yet, on a separate occasion, I asked him if I was correct to assume that most of the long-term residents in Heyang are the elderly. I brought up how, aside from major holidays, it was rare for me to see people my age, or anyone under their 40s, for that matter. He replied to me with much clamor to say that I was not entirely accurate, and that while many have indeed *gone out*, there are still many young people in the village. “They work regular hours, that’s why you don’t see them much. Some work all day and only return very late at night,

but they are at home, *zaijiali* 在家里。” This was his way of justifying why this demographic was invisible to me during my visits. Notably, in describing their presence in the village, he used the term, *zaijiali*, which literally means to be *at home* or *in the home*, but spoken here, he means that they are in Heyang. I learnt that, while living at home, some youth worked in construction, and most others worked in factories across the wider Xinjian Township, factories similar to Mr. Tang’s. As I gathered from several other informants, a factory worker could earn up to 2-3000 yuan (US\$300-462) per month, and the barriers to entry were extremely low. This was a salary that could certainly lift even the poorest of households out of absolute poverty.

According to my informant, Ye Dong:

in a place like Jinyun, if you just settle down and go to work in the factories, even if your family’s goal is to build a house, it’s not so difficult [to achieve], and life would not be too bad. If you think about it, and as far as I know, if your parents both work in the factories, they can make a decent salary. (Group Interview, February 16, 2019, Heyang Village)

The caveat, however, is that one must be willing to work in factories and in their conditions of tedium, repetition, and physical labor. “This life can be achieved, but only if you can and are willing to stick it out,” Ye Dong added (Group Interview, February 16, 2019, Heyang Village).

Zhu Yijia was among this group of young, local factory workers. After returning to Heyang from Shanghai, Yijia found himself with ‘nothing to do,’ *meishigan* in Heyang. As I discussed in the previous chapter, this is a phrase that “connotes not just inactivity and the boredom that goes with it but also a sense of worthlessness” (Jacka, 2006, p. 133). Before becoming a ticket vendor at the tourist site, Yijia first found work in a factory in Xinjian. However, he quit after only two years. “I just didn’t want to do it anymore. It didn’t suit me. I’ve gotten used to being lazy, [the factory] needed you to clock in at a specific time and clock

out of a specific time,” he explained. Later, he also expressed how he did not like the monotony of such low-skill and manual labor, as well as his disdain for working for the factory boss and his displeasure in being a *dagong* worker; a subjectivity that Wanning Sun (2010) describes as connoting “the collective experience of being subjugated to the capitalist regime of the workplace” (p. 291). Interestingly, contrary to the experience of China’s millions of *dagongzai* 打工仔 and *dagongmei* 打工妹 – the patronizing and gendered variants of being a rural migrant worker, *nongmingong* (see for instance Pun 1999; Jaguscik, 2011; Dooling, 2017) – Yijia and those who were similarly employed to *dagong* in these more locally-based factories did not migrate to become ‘laborers.’ Rather, it was by returning to their hometowns or remaining at home where they joined the global assembly lines and became cogs in the great Chinese factory. Yijia’s experience illustrates how despite the local state’s claim that there are bountiful job opportunities, many found these opportunities to be limited in terms of their scope and in the nature of their work. His reluctance to work in the factory reflects the undesirability of factory jobs for some of the local youth within the township. It also speaks to Heyang’s ‘culture of migration,’ where most have historically left to become self-employed households, rather than laborers. In fact, what some may consider the lower *quality* of such jobs and the stigma surrounding the *dagong* laborer is also suggested by my observation that many of these jobs were occupied by non-locals, and presumably people from yet poorer regions of China.

Writing on the subjective experiences of *dagongmei* and *dagongzai*, Pun Ngai and Huilin Lu (2010) articulate how China’s process of proletarianization has been a “peculiar” one because, “[i]n order to incorporate the Chinese socialist system into the global economy, the Chinese authorities called on rural workers to work in the city but not to stay in the city” (p. 497). The resulting system that spatially separates industrial production and labor reproduction

has produced “an *unfinished process of proletarianization*, which [has led] to a deepening sense of *becoming incomplete*, that is, of becoming *nongminggong* (a ‘quasi-’ or ‘half-’ worker in the industrial world)” (Pun & Lu, 2010, p. 498). Indeed, in Pun and Lu’s analysis of the *nongminggong* subjectivity, the incompleteness of migrant laborers’ proletarianization translated into “a sense of inadequacy” and “a process of wandering,” as the “*nongminggong* has had nowhere to go and nowhere to stay” (p. 498). It was a subjective experiencing of uprootedness and un-rootedness. Yet, within the current discussion of the discourse of *xiangchou* and rural return, does this intention to *reroot* rural labor complete the process of proletarianization?

In 2010, a 24-year-old university graduate from Heyang named Zhu Xiaohui partook in an internet suicide pact.<sup>59</sup> He took his life in a hotel room in Xinjian with another 24-year-old from a rural area in Yunnan province, who made the trip to Xinjian just for this – his final – journey. Zhu graduated from Lishui Broadcast and Television University, where he majored in industrial and civil construction. He is described as having been a positive and high-achieving student (*jiji* 积极), a point emphasized by reporters who reiterated twice that his ‘signature’ in his main social media page, QQ Space (QQ 空间), was a play on Mao’s catchphrase that implores all to: ‘Study hard and make progress every day.’ After graduating, however, Zhu spent the next two years in a state of ‘stuckedness’ (Hage, 2005) or social suspension (Xiang, 2016), where he hopped from one low-paying job to the next as a *dagongzai*, laborer. Reflecting on his grandson’s death, Zhu’s grandfather laments to reporters that he spent too much time worrying about his grades over cultivating his values and goals. Zhu’s sister-in-law is also quoted saying, “I think he was full of ideals when he was in school. But when he entered society, he realized

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<sup>59</sup> The original news article of the incident can be retrieved at: <http://news.sohu.com/20100331/n271218779.shtml>

that there was a tremendous distance between his ideals and reality” (Sohu News, 2010). Zhu ultimately returned to Heyang where the only ‘acceptable’ path forward – aside from the unthinkable option of remaining a *dagongzai*, laborer, or becoming a *nongmin*, farmer – presented itself in the form of death. In one of her final conversations with the departed, Zhu’s sister-in-law recalls asking him what sort of job he wanted, to which he replied promptly with: “as long as I don’t have to *dagong*” (Sohu News, 2010).

Reflecting on this tragic story, Yuezhi Zhao (2017) writes:

Instead of following the predictable path of using higher education as a one-way ticket out of rural life in the processes of modernization and urbanization, we have a case of a university-educated young man who had ended up returning to the village, only to become fatally obsessed with the Internet. Apparently, Zhu neither could find desirable urban office work nor had the desire to become an industrial wage laborer, let alone becoming a farmer. (p. 4398)

Although this may appear as an extreme case, one only needs to be reminded of the many public outcries against the numerous migrant suicides that took place in China’s recent memory. Deplorable work conditions and oppressive work dormitories were certainly reason enough to severely impact the mental and physical wellbeing of workers, but it was also the subjectivity of being a *dagongzai/mei* and the feelings of inadequacy, loss, and extreme low self-esteem – feelings frequently expressed by the mandarin term, *zibei* 自卑 – that have that literally pushed migrants to the edge, and in many unfortunate cases, off the ledge. Indeed, such a form of ‘inferiority’ is not just a subjectively experienced feeling, but due to institutional barriers such as the *hukou* system, and due to the cultural embeddedness of such terms as *sushi*, and indeed, ‘tu,’ that order social hierarchies, this inferiority is socially engrained and imposed upon individual bodies and the collective subjectivity of being a migrant worker; of being a person with a rural background who is neither here nor there.

Zhao's remarks upon Xiaohui's case highlights the dilemma of China's developmental model where the notion of 'work' and being 'productive' – particularly for those with relatively fewer means and are relatively lower in 'status' – is seemingly inseparable from the exploitative labor relations and hierarchies produced through the factory system and its more contemporary and digitized iterations, such as couriers to service the mega e-commerce ecosystem of production and consumption. Moreover, as Zhao's (2017) research also indicates, in the context of unprecedented interconnectivity, the age of the Internet has opened up platforms for youth of all backgrounds to see the same worlds, but their varying subjectivities along the urban-rural spectrum still prevent them from living the same realities. For returnees like Yijia, returning to the rural hometown may have been desirable – or his only option at the time – but he did not necessarily desire to return to his hometown to become a *dagongzai*. Yet, for returnees like Mr. Tang, this call for return did present a desirable option to not only quell his own *xiangchou*, but also to profit from a favorable business environment with support from the local state. In turn, Mr. Tang's return helped the local state advance its production and economic quotas through the initiative of "Xiangchou Industries to Enrich the People." Return to the 'nostalgic' countryside was possible, encouraged, and necessary, but not everyone returned as equals and to equal opportunities to thrive within an economy of *xiangchou*.

#### 5.4. Conclusion

Seeing Mr. Tang's factory in operation reminded me of another scene I encountered frequently in Heyang: a small group of middle-aged or elderly women, sitting quietly on small bamboo chairs stringing beads together. Situated along the tourist track in Heyang's *guminju*, this was a seemingly mundane snapshot of how idle people with 'nothing to do' killed time in the village. It was the image of easily overlooked men and women with dexterous fingers who

equally overlooked the tourists that faded into the background of their daily lives. In fact, so commonplace had these images been in my memory, that I had completely overlooked their significance until the workers in Mr. Tang's factory reanimated the Heyang locals and their bead-stringing in their real context: the global assembly line. Indeed, the beads that the locals were busy stringing together were products that were slated to be re-sold to wholesale buyers in the area, only to be (re)re-sold again by sellers from as far as the Horn of Africa and into the hands of consumers in markets as far as Barcelona. These villagers were cogs in the machinery of global trade and commerce, and the village of Heyang was, in effect, an ad hoc processing plant. According to my informant Zhu Runshan, who was once a part of this assembly line herself, this piecemeal manufacturing operation was set up by a local who returned to Heyang around 2007 after he completed a degree in Yiwu Business School. His business involved shipping semi-finished products from the adjacent city of Yiwu, the largest wholesale market for small commodities in all of China (Belguidoum & Pliez, 2015), into the hands of Heyang villagers. What this business model made use of was the cheap labor cost of the villagers, who were paid to assemble these small trinkets right in their homes. Runshan, who joined this ad hoc 'production team' in 2008, began by stringing beads together for cellphone charms, which she said only paid a few pennies per unit, or a couple dozen yuan a day. Eventually, she moved on to more complex jobs, such as assembling chairs out of metal wires. The pay went up marginally with the complexity of the task, but never amounted to anything above 100 yuan (US\$15.40) per day.

At the time, Runshan and her husband had just returned to Heyang from Hainan after suffering a devastating loss from shrimp farming. Desperately needing some income, but also needing to consider her duties as a mother to a child of schooling age, this humble assembly

operation presented itself as one of her few options at the time. Although the pay was so low, it was largely the flexibility of this job that made it an attractive option for locals, particularly women with household duties. In her words:

Villagers were free to determine their own working hours, and this was good for women and the elderly with childcare responsibilities. For me, I had to take my youngest to and from school every day, so I wound up in this business too. (Interview, February 2020, Heyang Village)

According to my colleague, Byron Hauck, whose concurrent study focuses on timekeeping habits in Heyang (2020), the only men he ever noticed engaged in such handiwork were those who had disabilities. As Hauck noted to me, the job kept these men from what would otherwise be an entire day of aimless wandering in the village. Writing on this same phenomenon, Zhao (2017) remarks how it was the “old, the young, and housewives – in short, the most unemployable labor forces in the factory system – [who were] doing the lowest skilled and most labor-intensive assembling jobs on a piecemeal basis” (p. 4409). The few men that Hauck encountered therefore confirm Zhao’s observations. To this point, however, I argue as well that this bead-stringing labor force should not just be viewed as the ‘unemployables,’ as many of these outputting workers were not necessarily looking for full-time employment. Rather, those employed in this piecemeal labor were predominantly those looking to kill some time, and, as a small, added bonus, make some pocket money for their grandchildren to buy sweets and toys. This was especially the case for the elderly, who, in acknowledging the very meagre pay, saw this as a way to keep themselves busy. In other words, this manual labor became an important social activity in the village, and a form of productivity that could be performed in between household duties, such as childcare responsibilities. Although the work was small in reward and repetitive in its task, it was nevertheless a form of outputting that provided some financial

reward, offered villagers a sense of freedom and flexibility, and was a means to share time and socialize. More importantly, they had autonomy, and they could exercise their agency as, effectively, their own bosses – in control of their time and their labor. However, given the meager pay, this line of work was not suited to ‘employables’ such as Runshan, whose family was in debt and whose husband’s salary was not sufficient to support the family alone.

Although it paid more, Mr. Tang’s factory was an assembly line where laborers were working in the service of capital, with their heads buried and hands busy for a set number of hours, to meet a set quota of products, under the careful watch of factory supervisors. Other than the fact that these factories were in rural milieus – and for some, right in their hometowns – the nature of the work was not necessarily different from the work they would perform as migrant laborers in cities. Moreover, some had even migrated to these relatively more ‘developed’ rural areas from other parts of rural China. They thereby retain the descriptor of being a person who has migrated to work, but how their ‘status’ as a ‘migrant laborer’ differs in rural host-towns/villages as opposed to urban host-cities is a subject that is worth further exploration. Indeed, while there is a plethora of research on rural to urban and even urban to rural migration, future research could study the inequalities and subjective experiences that are potentially produced by processes of *rural-to-rural labor migration*, especially within this developmental juncture of ‘Rural Revitalization’ and under the discursive reframing of the countryside as a place *of* and *for* ‘Xiangchou.’ To be sure, this is certainly not to deny the value that these factories and work opportunities can bring to an impoverished household and an entire rural community, nor is this a hasty critique of the efforts made by the Xi Jinping administration to alleviate poverty. However, as astutely indicated by Wang et al. (2020), the task towards true ‘rural revitalization,’ let alone, of achieving a ‘modern socialist country’ by 2049, necessitates

not only the elimination of absolute poverty in the countryside, but also the need for the state to take into account the *national* issue of *subjective poverty* – the subjective experience of ‘feeling poor.’

While it may be too early to conclude whether or not new rural subjectivities can be produced by the act of relocating these factories into rural milieus and whether or not similar forms of inequality will be reproduced, these existing issues that are deeply lodged in China’s urban-rural divide must be considered when evaluating what these new rural factories bring to a village like Heyang and to villagers, particularly youth, like Yijia. However, in the context of Heyang more specifically, it does appear that new class formations are beginning to emerge. On that note, I now turn to look at another group of ‘returnees’ to the countryside: young, white-collar, and urbanized entrepreneurs who, seeking to escape their lives of ‘burnout’ and ‘involution’ in cities such as Shanghai and Hangzhou, relocated their lives and businesses to Heyang, the ‘rural idyll.’ In Heyang, they became the inaugural cohort of e-commerce retailers who managed ‘Xiangchou businesses’ directly in the heart of Heyang’s *guminju*.

## 6. ‘Back Down to the Countryside’

On August 22, 2018, my WeChat feed was inundated by friends and colleagues in Jinyun who were circulating the same post made by the public account Jinyun Zhihui Lvyou 缙云智慧旅游 (Jinyun Smart-Tourism). The post was entitled, “Free Rent! Jinyun Heyang Ancient Heritage Dwellings’ Puts out a Call for Commercial Renters, People are Arriving in Droves...” (Jinyun Zhihui Lvyou, 缙云智慧旅游, 2018). The post opened with the following poem:

生活不止眼前的苟且/还有诗和远方/河阳古民居/一个古色古香的千年古村/趁现在来这开一家属于自己的小店吧

*Shenghuo buzhi yanqian de gouqie / haiyou shi he yuanfang / heyang guminju / yige guse guxiang de qiannian gucun / chenxianzai, laizhe kaiyijia shuyu ziji de xiaodian ba*

Life is not just the *gouqie* before your eyes / There are also poems and distant lands / Heyang *guminju*, an ancient village of a thousand years / Seize this moment, come here and open a boutique that belongs just to you. (Jinyun zhihui lvyou 缙云智慧旅游, 2018, para. 1)

In his chapter, “On the Virtues of Not Understanding,” James Whyte (1995) articulates how in the art of translation, “[w]e can never understand completely; what is more, our sense of incompleteness is itself a spur to investigation, learning, invention” (p. 335). Spurred by my own incomplete grasp of the language used to construct the four lines above, I launched myself into an investigation, beginning with the term *gouqie* 苟且. Although its meaning varies based on different lexical pairings, *gouqie* used in this context speaks of going through life in a perfunctory manner. “Life is not just the *gouqie* before your eyes” expresses how there is more to life than the tedium and the menial or uninspiring work of the day to day. My curiosity further piqued, I was lured down a digital rabbit hole by the first two lines in their entirety: *shenghuo buzhiyanqian de gouqie / haiyou shiheyuanfang*, “Life is not just the *gouqie* before your eyes /

There are also poems and distant lands.” A quick search of the phrase revealed that these were the lyrics of a popular song entitled “Shenghuo Buzhi Yanqian de Gouqie 生活不止眼前的苟且,” translated as “Live A More Than Desultory Life.” Search engine results also revealed that I was not alone in my inquiry about the phrase and its meaning. Countless discussion boards on Chinese social media platforms and online forums were created immediately after the song’s release, most of which sought to understand and make sense of the concept of a ‘desultory life’ and the accompanying imagery of ‘poems and distant lands.’

### 6.1. Introduction

As astutely observed by Li Zhang (2020), “the breathless pace of economic reforms in China has brought about profound ruptures not only in its socioeconomic structures but also its people’s inner landscape” (p. 2). Following Li Zhang’s logic, whilst the previous chapter outlined labor migration within a socioeconomic and ecological ‘crisis,’ this chapter discusses the return of ‘educated youth’ to the countryside amid an ‘inner crisis.’ This chapter begins by detailing this ‘inner crisis’ through a discussion of various internet discourses and social identities, focusing on the generational cohorts known as *balinghou* 八零后 and *jiulinghou* 九零后, the post-80s and 90s generations. From the above-introduced concept of ‘poems and distant lands’ to the novel repurposing of the anthropological term ‘involution,’ *neijuan* 内卷, (discussed below), I argue that anxieties surrounding expectations and pressures to ‘succeed’ are now dimming the once seductive allure of China’s first and second tier cities. In contrast, small towns and villages are now appearing in both official discourse and popular media as new lands of ‘opportunity’ for China’s youth, especially those seeking the proverbial ‘good life.’

This has created a novel social category known as the *fanxiangqingnian* 返乡青年, “return youth.”

In brief, the *fanxiangqingnian* phenomenon represents a budding movement of post-80’s and 90’s youth, typically (but not exclusively) with *hukou* from small towns and villages, who are choosing to return and resettle to their hometowns or other rural settings after having experienced life in first or second tier cities (Wang & Wu, 2019). In the second part of this chapter, I explore the *fanxiangqingnian* phenomenon in the context of Heyang, focusing on a group of youth that left their respective city-based jobs to open small boutiques within Heyang’s ancient heritage-dwellings tourist site, the *guminju*. Having become active participants in the village’s ‘*Xiangchou* tourism’ endeavor, I explore, on the one hand, the affective dimensions of these youths’ arrivals to Heyang, and on the other hand, the policies that not only enabled their entrepreneurship in the tourist site, but that also used their presence as a means to advance the various political agendas of different governing bodies. In other words, the arrivals of the youth to the countryside were manifestations of their individual *xiangchou* amidst an age of ‘inner crisis,’ and their presence as *fanxiangqingnian* was a reification of *Xiangchou*, with a capital ‘X,’ as a materialized form of development.

Although the *fanxiangqingnian* phenomenon is certainly not to be confused with the ‘sent-down’ youth of the 1960s-80s, history does not form in a vacuum. Any mention of ‘educated youth’ and the state’s involvement in their (self)rustication inevitably brings to mind Mao’s infamous “Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside Movement.” I therefore include in this chapter a discussion of the *fanxiangqingnian* in relation to the *zhishiqingnian* 知识青年 (educated youth) of the Mao-era. In doing so, this chapter illustrates how there is historical continuity in not only the state’s envisioned role of the country’s youth as the

lynchpins between the urban and the rural, but also how various forms of ‘cultural nostalgia’ have been integral to these top-down processes; from ‘*zhiqing* nostalgia’ to *xiangchou*, from Mao to now, and from the mass line to the Party line with varying degrees of successes and setbacks.

## 6.2. Internal Landscaping: Memes, Chicken Soup, and Attempting to Escape ‘Involution’

The song “Live A More Than Desultory Life” reached 4.5 million plays only three days after its release on March 18, 2016. One reason for its massive popularity was certainly the powerhouse team behind its creation. It was performed by singer Xu Wei 许巍, who has a devout following and is known as a “rock n’ roll poet” in mainland China, and it was written by Gao Xiaosong 高晓松, a highly regarded media personality and overall talent of many hats within China’s music and entertainment industries. But beyond this star power, the song saw so much popular resonance because of its lyrics. In particular, it was the chorus, “Live a more than desultory life / Open arms to poems and distant lands,” that began trending on Chinese social media. A lifestyle ‘hashtag’ was even created out of the song’s title (#生活不止眼前苟且#). It was viewed over 60 million times and was the subject of over 60,000 new posts on the microblogging site Weibo in less than a month’s time (Sina Media 新浪娱乐, 2016). These words clearly struck a chord amongst the masses, many of whom interpreted it as a reflection upon the tedium of their own lives, a grieving over faded youth, a reminiscence over past dreams and ideals, and a sudden distaste for the material frivolity embedded within urban middle-class and white-collar pursuits.

On the weekend of the song’s release, various ‘pop-psychology’ and ‘self-help’ blogs –

articles colloquially known as “chicken soup for the soul” *xinlingjitang* 心灵鸡汤 – capitalized on the virality of the phrase as well, imparting pop-wisdom that encouraged readers to *carpe diem*, that is, to quit the rat race and ‘seize the day.’ On Zhihu, the Chinese version of Quora, a netizen by the username Yeyuanfang 叶元方 even likened Gao’s lyrics to a sentiment expressed by the fictional character John Keating from the 1989 American film “Dead Poets Society,” the film that arguably popularized the Latin phrase, *carpe diem*. The netizen referenced the scene where Keating, portrayed by the late actor Robin Williams, impresses upon his students the importance of living a life not necessarily determined by the pursuit of prestigious careers and material wealth, but to live one that is fulfilling, meaningful, and appreciative of the epic play that is humanity (Yeyuanfang, 2015). The essence of Keating’s impassioned lesson is captured in the four characters, *shi-he-yuan-fang*, ‘poems-and-distant-lands.’ It is the pursuit of the ‘good life.’ Yet, after the initial hype surrounding the song began to subside, doubts started to surface. Netizens began questioning not only the value and messaging behind the song, but also the applause that it was receiving. While some continued to sing its praises, others blasted various criticisms. Opposing opinions revealed a generational and a class divide.

### 6.2.1. A Soup of Acquired Taste: The Generational Divide

According to Gao, it was his mother who coined the phrase ‘poems-and-distant-lands,’ and he credits her as well for having instilled in him an outlook on life that places little value on material belongings (Gao, 2016). He adopted the phrase as his life mantra, arguing that it guides him to live by the principle of a “materially-unbounded” life (Gao, 2016), and where being landless is the truest expression of human freedom. In his words, he is a *wufangzhuyizhe* 无房主义者, a practicing ‘anti-homeowner-ist’ (Gao, 2016). Interestingly, Gao is not the only member of the global elite who has questioned the value of homeownership. A simple tweet

from the CEO of Tesla, Elon Musk in May 2020 also announced his intentions of “selling almost all physical possessions,” and that he “will own no house” (Musk, 2020). However, in the context of China – a country with one of the highest homeownership rates in the world and where owning a home is practically a prerequisite for marriage, and an indicator of status, wealth, and selfhood (L. Zhang, 2011; Wu, Bian, Xue, & H. Zhang, 2021) – Gao’s very public shunning of any aspirations in this regard can certainly be considered ‘radical.’

Therefore, while many took the song and related ‘chicken soup’ articles with tears in their eyes, others were only able to utter the driest of chuckles, a sardonic and deliberately flaccid *he-he* 呵呵, as they questioned the value and relatability of Gao’s words to the commonfolk. Reporter Xie Qishan (2016) for the *Guangzhong Daily* highlighted several common criticisms directed towards the song following its impressive debut, namely that it was escapist and idealistic, tone-deaf and elitist. According to Xie (2016), one netizen even suggested rearranging the phrase to “life is more than poems and distant lands, there is also the *gouqie*.” This was a jab at the song for being only relatable to those who had ‘made it,’ whereas for others, it should instead be a wakeup call to ‘keep at it.’ Meanwhile, other netizens expressed bitterness, arguing that it is only because Gao is in a position of relative wealth and privilege that he is able to confidently eschew the material comfort that others struggle an entire lifetime to achieve. Housing, in particular, both reflects as well as exacerbates class divide. The experiences of Heyang’s many duck and shrimp farmers are prime examples of those who go to great lengths and sacrifice for the singular aim of homeownership in their hometowns. For them, however, owning a home is not only a form of material affirmation, but also a critical form of security against their precarity as migrants, and a lifeline for their dependants and descendants as holders of rural *hukou*. To invoke David Harvey’s (2008) concept of the “right

to the city,” for many migrants in Heyang, it is a struggle to gain *back* the rights to their own home-village. Meanwhile, in an urban context, housing is also the ultimate battleground for not only one’s ‘belonging’ in a city – and indeed, for one’s *rights to the city* – but ultimately for one’s belonging to the so-called ‘middle-class.’ As Harvey (2008) emphasizes, homeownership has been central to the construction of the neoliberal ‘middle-class’ consciousness. This was true in 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris, in Thatcher’s Britain, and, later, in reform-era China, where the controversial introduction of the Property Rights Law in the early 2000s helped solidify a political economic and sociocultural system of inequalities described by Harvey (2005) as “neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics” (for media, intellectual, and popular debates surrounding the Property Rights Law, see Zhao, 2008).

Notably, it was especially the post-80s and 90s – those who grew up with the rise of the ‘neoliberal self’ – that were critical of the song. It became a bitter pill to swallow for China’s ‘millennials,’ whose sentiments are captured in a popular blog entry, entitled: “Post-90s: Life is not just the *gouqie* before your eyes, there is also stomach failure and neck pains” (Qimiaoyaoshui, 2017). This was clearly a scornful play on words, and the article detailed the various social, financial, and even cultural pressures (*yali* 压力) and accompanying physiological and psychological ailments shouldered by this generation. These sentiments also appear in the form of a graphic where the familiar silhouette of the ‘mushroom-head meme’ (*mogutoubiaoqingbao* 蘑菇头表情包) is looking out into a distant sunset with a caption below that reads:<sup>60</sup> “Life is not just the *gouqie* before your eyes, there is also the *gouqie* in the distance”

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<sup>60</sup> The ‘mushroom-head’ figure is one of the most popular *biaoqingbao*, literally a “facial expression,” in the Chinese digital landscape. It is also a commonly used one within what is known as *sang* culture (丧文化), an online sub-culture that translates as “decadent culture,” and reflects especially the anxieties and frustrations of post-80s and 90s youth (Ying & Blommaert, 2020).

(Figure 5). It paints the picture of a seemingly endless struggle to not only get ahead, but to remain afloat. Relatedly, in January 2021, the ‘hashtag,’ ‘Just-how-big-are-the-pressures-for-the-post-80s-and-90s-generations’ (#80后90后的压力有多大#) also became a hot-topic on Weibo. By March, it amassed over 940 million views and had generated over 105,000 individual posts engaging with the concept of generational pressure.



**生活不止眼前的苟且  
还有远方的苟且**

*Figure 5: A popular ‘meme’ on ‘Gouqie’*

A popular ‘meme’ that reads: life is not just the ‘gouqie’ before your eyes, there is also the ‘gouqie’ in the distance. (Wantubizhiwang 万图壁纸网, n.d.)

China’s millennials have grown up in and graduated into a vastly different China from those born in the post-70s or earlier. As Hatty Liu and I argued elsewhere, these generational divides matter, and this has everything to do with the extraordinary speed of China’s development since the reform and opening up era (Qian & Liu, 2018). China’s post-80s and 90s

youth are facing a range of concerns that outgrew a rapid and condensed period of economic ‘development with Chinese characteristics.’ This includes inflated housing prices, dismal job prospects, care for an ageing population upon a generation of ‘singletons,’ and an often uncomfortable and irreconcilable balancing act between ‘traditional ways’ and new values in the face of a globalizing world order. They grew up with the rise of a form of ‘neoliberal developmentalism’ that champions both self-development and the cultivation of *suzhi* [‘quality’] (Anagnost, 2004; Kipnis, 2006), a harmful combination of individualized and collectivized understandings of ‘success’ versus ‘failure,’ individual self-worth and inherited social value. That is, while ‘self-development’ places emphasis on an individual’s efforts towards achieving upward mobility, *suzhi* reifies sociocultural and political economic inequalities across social strata. ‘Success,’ meanwhile, is epitomized by the term *bei-shang-guang-shen* 北上广深, the aspirational aphorism that announces first-tier cities Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen as the land of opportunity and the home of the ‘high-quality’ modern citizen.

### **6.2.2. Ants at the Foothill of an Insurmountable Mountain**

The metropolitan city and its fast-paced, urban lifestyle have become the centralized node where these generational pressures are embedded into the practices and expectations of the everyday. Internet memes have emerged to reflect these contemporary and generational anxieties, and the popularity of some of these sub-cultures and social identities, such as *diaosi* and poems-and-distant-lands, reflect a prominent culture of ‘burnout,’ a phenomenon depicted by Byung-Chul Han’s (2015) conceptualization of a ‘Burnout Society,’ where, unlike in a disciplinary society, the “achievement-subject” is not so much *forced to work* but is self-disciplined and conditioned to *need to achieve* (pp. 9-11). Although traits of the ‘Burnout Society’ are identifiable in cities worldwide, China’s *hukou* system differentiates and determines

how this ‘burnout’ is experienced along the lines of not only class and occupational status, but through urban and rural, as well as geographical ‘belonging.’ This is especially the case for migrant youth with ‘lower-class’ backgrounds, whose presence in larger cities are not only perched precariously on borrowed time and space, but is also burdened by internalized and institutionalized feelings of ‘inadequacy,’ low self-esteem, and sociocultural disadvantage that influence their subjective experiences in first and second tier cities in ways that do not necessarily impact their urban or more ‘elite’ counterparts (see for instance, Qing, 2017; Jin & Ball, 2019; K. Zhao, 2020). Even if they are able to study their ways into China’s elite institutions, their ‘burnout’ is not just a pursuit towards ‘success,’ but rather, an incessant struggle for acceptance. They are burning out to remain in, let alone, achieve the rights to, the city.

Theoretically, those born in the 80s-90s should be the ultimate beneficiaries of privatization and the proliferation of the ‘neoliberal work ethic.’ Indeed, it was in the late 1990s when the state decided to expand college enrollment, announcing its goal of increasing its student body by 25-30% per year (He & Mai, 2015, p. 335). In absolute figures, this was certainly achieved, as between 1999-2011, the number of yearly college graduates increased from 0.8 million to 6.1 million (He & Mai, 2015, p. 335). Education should therefore have been a socio-economic equalizer, where even those of poor rural backgrounds are promised the *opportunity* to attend China’s elite universities, and where ‘becoming educated’ could be a way out of both sociocultural and economic poverty, and into the well-developed arms of *bei-shang-guang-shen*. The problem, however, became the economy’s inability to adequately absorb this new and educated labor force. Education became part and parcel of broader institutionalized inequalities that contribute to the urban-rural divide.

Ironically, the expansion of college enrollment was a decision made partly to boost domestic consumption and curb further unemployment in the 1990s-2000s, a time where millions had already been laid off due to the restructuring of China's State-owned enterprises. This was also a time when the economy was lagging overall in the wake of the 1998 Asian Financial Crisis. Yu He and Yinhua Mai (2015) explain how an official blueprint to stimulate the economy was proposed to the state in 1998, and it included a suggestion to increase college enrollment on the justification that generating more students could, among other things, "relieve the recent unemployment [*sic*] by postponing the entry of millions of high school graduates into the labour market" (p. 335). However, by the time these high school graduates emerged as college graduates, what was ultimately postponed was unemployment, and it came with a high societal interest fee with the added dramatics of the Global Financial Crisis of 2008 thrown in as well. He and Mai (2015) report that the graduate unemployment rate between 2007-2011 was over 10%, and Karita Kan (2013) argues that an estimated 13 million new jobs would have been needed in order to "satisfy the basic demand arising from the fast-growing 'army of unemployed graduates'" (p. 70). Moreover, many of those employed found themselves in low-paying jobs. According to Kan (2013), only 3% of graduates landed jobs with monthly salaries of 5,000 yuan (US\$761) or higher, whilst 70% worked for a monthly starting salary of less than 2,000 yuan (US\$309) in 2011. For reference, the average property rental fee in Beijing in 2011 was 3,160 yuan (US\$489) per month, an increase of 13% from the previous year (China.cn.org, 2011).

In addition to an oversaturated labor market and overpriced rental market, institutional barriers – the *hukou* system in particular – give this education system its 'Chinese characteristics.' Weighing in on the debate between education as a conduit for social mobility or an avenue for Bourdieu's social reproduction, Yihan Xiong (2015) argues from the

perspective of migrant youth that although education has limited impact on their life chances, such an impact does not easily break from class reproduction. Kan's (2013) research confirms the embedded and difficult to surmount class biases when she argues that educated youth with 'lesser' backgrounds experience further disillusionment as they leave the schoolyard for the workforce. There, they are not only confronted by a lack of upward mobility in the job market, but they are competing in a system that systematically reproduces generational disparity and is underwritten by an institutionalized preference for the rich over the poor, the urban over the rural (Kan, 2013, p. 68). In other words, "those from the lower strata [of society] have basically 'lost out at the starting line'" (Kan, 2013, p. 68). Without proper *guanxi* (transactional or networked social relations), status, or wealth, many recent graduates with rural or 'poorer' backgrounds are most likely to end up working in low-paying jobs, penny pinching whilst living in desolate conditions. As observed by Kan (2013), among many others (see for instance, Fish, 2015; He & Mai, 2015; Bregnbæk, 2015), the plight of China's underemployed graduates even formed a subjectivity known as the "ant tribe" (*yizu* 蚁族), a term coined by Lian Si (2009) in his groundbreaking sociological study entitled, *China's Ant Tribe: Between Dreams and Reality*. Like the hardworking ergate, these graduates are highly intellectual, but ultimately small and vulnerable. The 'ant colony' metaphor is most poignant when observing the living conditions of many of these graduates, where, unable to afford the astronomical rental fees in city centers and unable to rely on their families for financial support, many live clustered together in cheap housing known as ant colonies, or even 'intellectual slums' (Kan, 2013).

Suffice it to say, migrants, both of education and labor, live in perpetual precarity. They are the most vulnerable to the decisions made at the top when it comes to city planning and corresponding measures of population 'control' based on *suzhi*, means of production, and city

appearances. Furthering the parallels between the educated ‘ants’ and low-skilled migrants, Susanne Bregnbæk (2015) argues that both subjectivities are participants in a “race to the bottom.” Tragically, the depths of this ‘bottom’ are dark, as cases of suicide amongst disillusioned migrant students and graduates are not at all dissimilar to the heartbreaking tales of *dagongzai* and *dagongmei* who found suicide to be the only form of escape from the drudgery – indeed, the *gouqie* – on factory floors (see Chan, Selden, & Pun, 2020). In fact, the heartbreaking story of Zhu Xiaohui’s suicide introduced in the previous chapter, speaks precisely to these parallels (p. 201). To restate, Zhu was a university educated person from Heyang who took his own life in an organized ‘suicide pact’ with a netizen he met online, another college-graduate with a rural background. The sense of hopelessness embedded in Zhu’s story becomes even more poignant when situated in this current discussion on the ‘plight of migrant graduates.’

Kan’s (2013) research sheds even more light upon the desperate predicament of many educated rural-originated youth like Zhu from villages like Heyang. Kan writes: “[a]lthough the option of returning home is available, the shame of going back without a promising career after their parents have spent almost all family savings on their education keeps them from doing so” (p. 70). Shame over the inability to land and keep a ‘respectable’ job colored Zhu’s return to Heyang. Bregnbæk’s (2015) analysis of a suicide case from 2005 of a soon-to-be-graduate from the prestigious Beijing University only further confirms such feelings of ‘shame’ and ‘guilt,’ when she details how the student left a suicide note to her parents to express her grief over her inability to meet their expectations. According to Bregnbæk (2015):

One story had it that she was about to graduate, but was being bypassed in job interviews because she lacked the kinds of connections that can open doors. Some students quietly

remarked that suicide was really the only way to escape from the pressure. (p. 990)

In fact, in her subsequent publication, *Fragile Elite* (2016), Bregnbæk ultimately illustrates how this pressure towards becoming (even more) ‘high-quality’ concerns not only the most marginalized, but those who are the considered elite as well. Therefore, for the ‘ants,’ the ‘losers,’ and the elite, the imagery of ‘poems-and-distant-lands’ is elusive, so long as the hegemonic constructions of not only ‘success,’ but also of ‘filial piety,’ the neoliberal constructs of ‘self-improvement,’ and the social embeddedness of *suzhi* enslave them in the pursuit towards the ideals and aspirations embedded in *bei-shang-guang-shen*, a similarly elusive place. Rather than moving ‘upward’ by attaining higher and higher degrees or working more and more hours, they remain in a *state of suspension*, and this suspension is reflected not only in their transience, as defined by Xiang Biao (2017), but it is also an existential and psychological suspension. With reference to Ghassan Hage’s (2005) “existential movement” as well as the Spinozist conception of “joy,” Bregnbæk (2015) concludes that “the experience of running but remaining socially, economically and existentially stuck seems to be what leads to despair both among migrant workers and among unemployed Chinese university graduates” (p. 999). In effect, Bregnbæk (2015/2016) is describing a widespread ‘achievement complex’ that also impacts youth who have ‘made it,’ so to speak. That is, whilst there is a struggle to move upwards, there is also “a deep fear of falling downward” for the middle and upper classes (Xiang, quoted in Wang & Ge, 2020). This is a sociological condition that has grown out of China’s expanding middle class, and it is rendered even more visible through the fascinating repurposing of the anthropological term, ‘involution’ in contemporary Chinese discourses. In other words, China’s youth are operating within not only a *burnout society*, but an *involuting society*.

### 6.2.3. An Existential Spiral: From ‘Involution’ to ‘Inner-Revolution’

According to Collin McCullough (2019), the term ‘involution’ was coined by anthropologist Alexander Goldenweiser to depict “a culture that cannot (or does not) adapt and or expand its economy but continues to develop only in the direction of internal complexity and inefficiency” (p. 2). Later, in one of his most important works, *Agricultural Involution* (1963), Clifford Geertz applied the term to the study of the agricultural economy of Java in Indonesia where he also introduced the concept of “shared poverty.” Geertz (1963) explains how, despite increased agricultural sophistication and labor input, the economy remained in a state of stagnation. In an analysis of Geertz’s work, Yew-Foong Hui (2009) articulates how ‘involution’ “encapsulates the irony, and to Geertz, the tragedy, of change without change, that is, change that is inconsequential” (p. 20).

Geertz’s work remains influential in the study of agrarian economies. Yet, its emergence in the context of contemporary China as *neijuan* 内卷 – literally, to spiral inwards – now defines a particular form of ‘stagnation’ within *modern urban* culture, where an increased input of effort neither results in perceivable output nor any substantive form of change in ‘wealth,’ ‘status,’ or the subjective experiences of ‘happiness’ and ‘fulfillment.’ As it was described by Wang Qianni and Ge Shifan (2020) for the digital publication Sixth Tone:

involution has become shorthand used by Chinese urbanites to describe the ills of their modern lives: Parents feel intense pressure to provide their children with the very best; children must keep up in the educational rat race; office workers have to clock in a grinding number of hours. (para. 1)

Involution means that an increase in hours worked, money earned or spent, and effort expounded can no longer bring ‘success’ as it is socially defined, accepted, and understood.

In an extensive interview with Wang and Ge, Xiang (2020) argues that China's young adults have also come of age and graduated into a China where "Confucian culture [has] become competitive" (para. 47). In other words, to conform and to be well-integrated into society means to compete. 'Involution' therefore refers to a form of "total competition," where the very act of competing is a moral duty, but without the proportionate returns from efforts, this act becomes an "endless cycle of self-flagellation" (Xiang, quoted in Wang & Ge, 2020, para. 5). In total competition, everyone loses in a "shared poverty" of the spirit. This is involution; and it is through the digital sphere where the usage of such terms renders palpable the frustrations and experiences of 'involuting.' Notably, some of this online activity has even translated into tangible acts of protest and activism. For instance, white-collar tech workers – a 'sought-after' occupational and social status – came together to create a code-sharing community known as '996.ICU,' which uses '996' in reference to the relentless nine-to-nine, six-days-a-week work schedule that characterizes the tech sector, and with 'ICU' used as the acronym for 'Intensive Care Unit,' which is where many presumably end up if they are severely overworked. The aim of this platform was to call out and potentially blacklist companies that excessively overworked their employees, to pressure tech companies to agree to work hours that comply "with local labor laws and International Labor Organization standards" (Qu, 2019, para. 9), and to urge "people to 'go home at 6pm without feeling sorry'" (Qu, 2019, para. 3). Much like the sociological phenomenon of *karoshi* ("death by overwork") in Japan, 996.ICU calls out a work culture that creates a self-disciplining work force that is simultaneously rewarded and exploited for increased input. Within an overall *involuting society*, such 'stuckedness' is a widespread sociological and political economic condition of 'modernity' as it is predominantly known and experienced. It is the antithesis to existential 'fulfilment' and a life of 'joy.'

Ultimately, whether one found the chicken soup to their tastes or not, the message in the song “Live A More Than Desultory Life” gained so much attention because it touched on the *universal* quandary of ‘living to work or working to live’ – truly one of the biggest existential dilemmas of the modern times. With a ‘culture of competition’ engrained into nearly every facet of life in contemporary Chinese society, the desire for ‘poems-and-distant-lands’ is a human condition, however, the concept of the ‘*gouqie*’ is part and parcel of the modern condition. As evidenced by the example of Zhu Xiaohui’s suicide in the previous chapter (pp. 203-204), when taken to the extreme, the conundrum presented here for middle-class white-collars and educational and labor migrants alike is neither ‘living to work’ nor ‘working to live,’ rather, many are working towards a spiritual or literal death. Suffice it to say, a widespread culture of anxiety has seeped into Chinese society; it is an outgrowth of the culture of competition that, in turn, grew, in part due to Confucian culture and morals of conformity, ‘harmony,’ and even filial piety on the one hand; and China’s rapid and uneven integration with the global market economy on the other – truly, neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics.

In response to the internet flurry surrounding ‘involution,’ netizens soon began conversations on how to counter or escape this inner-spiral. According to Manya Koetse (2021), the hashtag ‘How can youth resist involution’ (#年轻人如何反内卷#) garnered over 280 million views on Weibo. Among the 230,000 related posts, one of the most ‘liked’ and engaged with was made by a netizen known as ShuangYe 霜叶 (2021), who wrote in a post that the only two viable ways to truly escape involution is to: 1) get rich overnight, and 2) forego any desires of having children. Both ‘solutions’ further highlight the financial pressures of living in a first or second tier city, let alone raising a family in one. The following viral post made by another Weibo gets even closer to the core of the issue:

One of the best things about China is that it is big. It's not as though every single young person has to come to first tier cities, they can go to provincial capitals, second tier cities, or lord forbid, even third or fourth tier cities – there's plenty of space for you there, why must you squeeze into first tiers to join the involuting? That's why, the best way to break free from involution is to quit the game, ok? That's right, I confess, I simply can't afford first-tier real estate, so what? I just can't stay any longer, so what? I will go back to a small town to live a simple life, so what? I have thick skin, so what? You guys carry on involuting, as long as you're happy. (Jiangzhehu Wangayi, 2021)

Their solution, even if just a satirical quip, is just to leave the central node of these social, financial, and aspirational pressures altogether. Interestingly, against the grain of the 'shameful' narrative of 'return,' a growing subset of youth are now choosing to do just that. To reinvoké Li Zhang (2020), "the breathless pace of economic reforms in China has brought about profound ruptures not only in its socioeconomic structures but also its people's inner landscape" (p. 2); and emerging from this 'ruptured inner landscape' is a new social category: the *fanxiangqingnian*, 'return youth.'

### 6.3. Return Youth and the Revitalization Effort

The *fanxiangqingnian* speaks to a small but very symbolic movement of millennials who, against norms of 'success,' are hoping to pursue an 'alternative' lifestyle that exists outside of the society perceived to be or experienced as the source of their involution. More broadly, the phenomenon of *fanxiangqingnian* rejoins a *global* demand for 'Slow Living' (Parkins & Craig, 2006; Yang, 2020), which is in and of itself a reaction to the 'stress and squalor' of big cities (Lane, 1994). Through this lens, the act of 'return' is not so much *beidong* 被动, that is, shameful, passive, or resigned; rather, it can be seen as *zhudong* 主动, an active choice and voluntary pursuit. In a way, this budding movement can be framed as what Peter Wallmeier (2017) proposes as an "exit-variety of critique," where a collective withdrawal from sites of

socioeconomic socialization – in this case, where one is expected to aspire towards becoming a modern and urban citizen with high *suzhi* – becomes a form of social critique and act of protest. According to Wallmeier’s (2017) comparative study of intentional communities in the US in the 1960s and 2000s, this critique, whether ‘radical’ or ‘reformist’ is ultimately anti-state, anti-establishment, and counter hegemonic. What is therefore interesting about the *fanxiangqingnian* phenomenon is the fact that bottom-up desires to withdraw from the city and abandon normative *bei-shang-guang-shen* ideals are also coinciding with top-down efforts to achieve the same thing: bring youth back to the countryside. Similar to the discussion in the previous chapter on the return of low-skilled migrant laborers, the ‘return’ of educated youth is framed in official discourse and media as not only desirable, but also ‘honorable’ and necessary. The formation of the *fanxiangqingnian* is at once a bottom-up desire for the ‘good life’ and a genuine critique of the dominant sociological and political economic order of the ‘involuting society;’ as well as a top-down imperative to alleviate the issues of graduate and youth unemployment, as well as mobilize youth participation in the ‘revitalization effort.’

### 6.3.1. Heyang: The ‘Distant Land’

With all of this in mind, let us now revisit the poem that opened this chapter:

Life is not just the *gouqie* before your eyes / There are also poems and lands afar / Heyang *guminju*, an ancient village of a thousand years / Seize this moment, come here and open a boutique that belongs just to you. (Jinyun Zhihui Lvyou, 缙云智慧旅游, 2018, para. 1, lines 1-5)

This innocuous phrase, written by representatives of Jinyun County, now appears as a way to capitalize on popular desires to escape the cycle of involution and general urban disillusionment. It indicates an attempt by the local state and its propaganda organs to juxtapose the drudgery of

‘urban maladies’ against a life of leisure in the imagery of the rural idyll. The invitation to open a shop is a promise of spiritual fulfillment in the ‘distant land’ of Heyang, and both *financial* and professional fulfillment in its ‘*Xiangchou* Tourism’ industry.

This was effectively an advertisement used to circulate the news of one of the local state’s new developmental projects: to convert parts of the historic village into a bustling shopping street for tourists. The post was a call to entrepreneurs interested in operating a small boutique in the *guminju*, and it was a joint initiative launched by the MC and the Heyang village double committee (VDC). For the MC, this initiative was launched directly in response to the county government’s “Xiangchou Industries” plan, and for the VDC, this project was also implemented to further support the village’s bid to attain the coveted status of ‘4A’ tourist attraction in 2018 (see Chapter 2, p. 39). The stated intention of this initiative was to enliven the village with more attractions for visitors, create more venues for consumption within the tourist site, diversify the local economy, and create more jobs for locals and enhance their livelihoods, all the while maintaining Heyang’s “original *xiangchou* flavor.”

The main site slated as this commercial hub was the street behind the Bashimen, ‘Eight Scholar Gate’ (introduced in Chapter 2, p. 50, and shown in Figure 2, p. 50), known as the Bashimenjie 八士门街, ‘Eight Scholar Gate Street.’ During the many years that the Bashimen served as the entrance to the village, the Bashimenjie, in its heyday, was the heart of village life, consumption, and leisure. Seeking to revive this golden era, the rest of the blog article writes:

[The] Bashimen is located right in the heart of heyang’s *guminju*, it is a must-see for all tourists. As we are entering a national movement of leisure travel, Heyang’s tourism development is also reaching its prime. Therefore, small shops along the key location of the Bashimen are expected to produce considerable revenue. (Jinyun Zhihui Lvyou, 缙云智慧旅游, 2018)

In addition to the touristic value of the Bashimenjie, other benefits offered by the local state to prospecting entrepreneurs included three years of free rent, the possibility for additional stipends, and favorable insurance policies. In exchange, conditions to the applicant outlined a contract that also stipulated their boutique shops will only be renovated within the regulations of the heritage-protected tourist site, that they will be ready to open no later than September 18, 2018, and that they should remain in operation at least 26 days a month. Furthermore, according to the state's criteria, applications were open to anyone, on the condition that all proposed businesses must be considered as "traditionally Jinyun." On this point, the blog post devoted extra care to detailing what "traditionally Jinyun" means, and is expressed in the following manner:

Small shops must engage in the sale or trade of "traditional Jinyun" products. This includes:

1. Traditional snacks: Jinyun pancake (*jinyunshaobing* 缙云烧饼) and wontons, malt candy, tea leaves, steamed rice cakes, and other assorted steamed and glutinous cakes and dumplings.
2. Traditional handicrafts: handmade sachets and cloth shoes, bamboo weavings, traditional paintings and calligraphy, local specialties (*tutechan* 土特产)
3. Other traditional businesses: approval will be granted on an application-by-application basis. (Jinyun zhihui lvyou 缙云智慧旅游, 2018)

From the above, these requirements seem straightforward. However, in true Heyang fashion, the search for entrepreneurs created a myriad of confusions and complications. There was another project happening concurrently but completely independently from the commercialization of the Bashimenjie. This is an important distinction to be made, as it is a reminder of the fact that the nature of governance over Heyang is highly decentralized and scattered, often creating more problems than solutions in the processes of development and heritage preservation. It illustrates as well how various government bureaus are all scrambling

to fulfill ‘Party orders’ for ‘revitalization,’ and gain recognition for their efforts.

The other project was organized by the Jinyun County Bureau of Human Resources and Social Security (County BOHRSS), with the administrative assistance of the Xinjian Township government. Neither the MC nor the VDC were involved. In other words, this was a project carried out by cadres that have otherwise no direct involvement with Heyang but was nonetheless a project that inflicted change on the village and villagers’ lives. It targeted another site within the *guminju* for commercial development, which was a traditional courtyard (*siheyuan* 四合院) behind the tourist site’s famous and most photographed stops, the Wall of Horse Heads (as shown in Figure 1, page. 12). Because this was a residential courtyard, it required villagers who owned the rights to the targeted buildings to agree to rent out the ground-floor units, and to convert their ancestral homes, where several still lived, to commercial use. In effect, the two projects were similar. Both involved the repurposing – and sometimes, the reappropriation – of residential dwellings into shops and services for tourists. Similar to the benefits provided by the MC and VDC, a commercial contract with the County BOHRSS also included the following incentives: up to three years free of rent, an annual stipend of 5,000 yuan (US\$474) for each year of operation for a maximum of three years, and up to 100,000 yuan (US\$15,584) in reimbursement for any development-related expenditure throughout the entire courtyard. What differed in the County BOHRSS’s project, however, was that the eligible entrepreneurs had to have achieved at least a university degree and needed to have experience in e-commerce or have amassed any other form of digital presence. Essentially, it targeted educated and tech-savvy youth.

Notably, this project was implemented on the suggestion of a report by Liu Guofu 刘国富, the Deputy Director of the Zhejiang Province Bureau of Human Resources and Social

Security (henceforth, Provincial BOHRSS). According to Liu's report (2018), he and three other provincial BOHRSS cadres were sent on an official visit to Heyang by the order of the Provincial Party Committee. Between April 17-20, 2018, the team carried out a thorough 'site investigation' to assess the further potentialities of 'revitalization' in Heyang. In their findings, they emphasized several challenges facing the village, one of which was the 'greying' of the village. That is, the village's inability to retain youth, and, consequently, the lack of *renqi* 人气 'human spirit' because of their absence. They further detailed that, in the past three years, only 11 college-educated youth have returned to their hometown to make a living. As a reminder, Heyang's total registered population at the time of this writing is over 3,300. The report concludes by emphasizing the need for the village to implement 'revitalization' strategies that can attract youth. It states:

Rural revitalization needs to attract and retain people, especially young people. Based on our research, as long as there are opportunities in the hometown, there are youth who are willing to return and start businesses. To attract young people requires the government to understand the needs, interests, and desires of youth; to identify suitable industries and implement policies accordingly; to make full use of local resources; and create for youth platforms and systems that can provide development opportunities. (Liu G., 2018)

The commercialization of the courtyard by the County BOHRSS was effectively a direct result of this report. By November 2018, Liu and several other high-ranking provincial cadres went to Heyang to officially inaugurate the site as the "Heyang courtyard for e-commerce and entrepreneurship" (*heyangdianshangsiheyuanchuangyeyuan* 河阳电商四合院创业园). The project was funded entirely by the Provincial BOHRSS, and more than just a cluster of storefronts, it took on symbolic and political value as a "pilot site" (*shifanqu* 示范区) to demonstrate how local states have been able to engage an educated cohort of youth – indeed,

the *fanxiangqingnian* – in rural revitalization.

As a matter of fact, even before the e-commerce courtyard came into operation, Heyang's *guminju* was already designated as a “practical learning site” (*xianchangjiaoxuedian* 现场教学点) for other youth-focused programs – either led by the state or encouraged by the Party – related to revitalization. In July 2018, for instance, a group of university students from the prestigious Zhejiang University in Hangzhou came as part of a state-sponsored summer program to ‘learn from’ Heyang. Rather tongue-in-cheek, this program was called the *qingzhijihua* 青知计划, “Educated-Youth Plan.” Under this initiative, 119 students were sent to various county and village-level bureaus on temporary placements to conduct ‘grassroots learning.’ According to reporting by state media Xinhua (2018), which was subsequently reposted onto the University’s official website, the plan was founded on the ethos of “Going Deep into the Grassroots; Becoming an ‘Educated youth’ of the Modern Era.” In true CCP rhetoric, the students who participated are described as having gone to the countryside to study the ‘spirit’ of the Party and implement ‘Xi-learning.’ Ultimately, they were being groomed to be the ‘next citizens’ to carry the mantle of nationalistic rejuvenation.

### 6.3.2. A Return Back Down to the Countryside?

There is an elephant in the room, which is: the very concept of ‘educated youth.’ Indeed, as alluded to above, any mention of (self)rusted youth in contemporary China inevitably recalls the controversial history involving Mao’s “Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside Movement” (DTCM) where, between 1968-1980, 17 million urban youth were ‘sent-down’ to live in the villages to be ‘re-educated’ by the peasantry (Honig & Zhao, 2019, p. 1). Although the *fanxiangqingnian*, ‘return youth,’ in the Xi-era are certainly not to be confused with the *zhishiqingnian* 知识青年, ‘educated youth,’ of the Mao-era, this elephant must be

addressed.

Just as any contentious decision made by the CCP, the DTCM is an episode in history that is not forgotten but remembered selectively (for detailed accounts of the fragmentation and uses of *zhiqing* memory, see for instance Yang G., 2003; Bonnin, 2016; Xu, 2019; Honig & Zhao, 2020). On the one hand, the understanding of this generation as the ‘lost generation’ is a reminder of how individual lives and bodies became the battlegrounds of ideological struggle and political factionalism. This was a generation of ‘squandered youth,’ and, for many, disadvantaged adulthood. But on the other hand, the subjectivity of the ‘educated youth’ is more multifaceted and complex. Xi Jinping himself is the ultimate personification of the nation and the Party’s complicated relationship with this history. Despite being a politically sensitive topic, time and time again, the general public is reminded that Xi was ‘re-educated’ in the countryside through a form of revisionist history that bathes an otherwise dim past in a heroic, or at least, self-sacrificial light. The extolling of the ‘*zhiqing* generation’ is part and parcel of the controversial patronage paid to the Chairman, which appears as a deviation from the subdued and status-quo sustaining styles of governance practiced by his immediate predecessors. The ‘cult of Xi,’ as some perceived it (see for instance Luqiu, 2016; Hart, 2016), was an uncomfortable reminder of the ‘cult of Mao,’ and critics saw the rise of Xi as a problematic ‘revival of red’ (Yang G. , 2016).

Therefore, netizens were understandably triggered in March 2019, when the Chinese Communist Youth League (CCYL) announced an ambitious goal of “organizing 10 million trips to the countryside for college-educated youth by 2022” (Chinese Communist Youth League Central Committee, 2019, p. 9). According to reporting by Steven Jiang (2019) for *CNN*, the CCYL’s announcement stirred painful memories of Mao-era policies for “many parents or

grandparents of the target demographic” (para. 7). Jiang (2019) supplemented his arguments with anecdotal evidence from his own parents, themselves former *zhiqing*, who “recalled stories of peers trying to kill themselves upon learning that their years of academic preparation would be wasted on tilling land instead of attending university” (para. 11), and from one of his uncles who, having also been sent-down during the Mao-era, was sympathetic to the negative reactions from netizens towards the CCYL’s announcement (para. 14). Likewise, other mainstream publications such as the *Guardian*, the *BBC*, and the *South China Morning Post*, were also quick to caution the “echo of Maoist policy” (France-Presse, 2019). Official party-line sources, however, emerged in response to a flurry of netizen concerns to insist that the CCYL’s announcement and the DTCM were *lianghuishi* 两回事, two completely separate affairs. The CCYL itself released an official statement to ‘refute rumors’ (*piyao* 辟谣) about any perceived resemblances to Mao-era policies, emphasizing instead the volunteerism and agency of the university students who would be taking these trips (Lin J. , 2019).

Although it is beyond the scope of this chapter to dissect the complexities and contradictions of ‘volunteerism’ in a post-revolutionary and post-reform China, state-sponsored programs that encourage youth to ‘descend to the countryside’ can be understood under the framework of “state-mobilized movement” (SMMs) provided by Grzegorz Ekiert and Elizabeth J. Perry (2020). Ekiert and Perry (2020) explain how SMMs are methods of “*ruling by other means*” (p. 3), and these ‘other means’ include volunteerism as part of an “array of collective social and political actions instigated or encouraged by state agents for the purpose of advancing state interests” (p. 5). In effect, the ‘10-million-trips’ quota was part of the CCYL’s plan known as *sanxiaxiang* 三下乡, a ‘social practice program’ created in 1997 for college-educated youth to go to the countryside as volunteers (*zhiyuanzhe* 志愿者), where they help “disperse the ‘three

(urban) assets' [of] technology, civilization, and sanitation to the underserved in China's countryside" (Sum, 2017, p. 415). Volunteerism also includes programs, such as the one mentioned above at Zhejiang University, where students take temporary service posts in county or lower levels of government bureaus to supposedly gain practice and awareness of 'the needs of the people.' Universities have been essential conduits for such forms of student volunteerism (see for instance Geng, 2008; Cui, 2011; Sum, 2017).

While Chun-yi Sum's (2017) research explores the dimensions of student agency and authenticity within their motivations to volunteer, David Palmer and Rundong Ning (2020) describe what are effectively forms of state-led volunteering in the following manner:

state-led volunteering in contemporary China paradoxically redeploys discursive and organizational legacies of revolutionary mobilization to attain the opposite goal of demobilization or depoliticization, channelling popular altruism and energies into forms of social service that reinforce market-driven governance and party-led nation-building. (p. 315)

In other words, the CCYL's announcement may not be a true 'return to Mao' by any means, however it is certainly not free from the Party's agenda either. For better or worse, neither is it divorced from the Party's revolutionary history. Moreover, this announcement was extracted from a document entitled: "CCYL Notification: Opinions Regarding Deepening the Development of the Countryside and Promoting Great Endeavors for Youth." This was published by the CCYL after the CCP's 19<sup>th</sup> National congress, which, in addition to the unveiling of the Rural Revitalization Strategy, the removal of presidential term limits, and the enshrining of 'Xi Jinping Thought' into the Party constitution, also emphasized the slogan, 'Strong Youth, Strong Nation; Prosperous Youth, Prosperous Nation' (*qingnianqiang, zeguogiang; qingnianxing, zeguoxing* 青年强, 则国强; 青年兴, 则国兴). Analyzing the

significance of these various slogans and policy priorities, Luo Ming (2019) concludes:

no doubt, in the new practices of the rural revitalization strategy, youth play an increasingly important role in maintaining stable rural governance, rural economic development, the construction of rural culture and civilization, and other areas. (p. 11)

Therefore, almost as if to actualize and implement ‘Xi-learning,’ the CCYL’s document was essentially an outline of the Party’s call to action for educated youth to contribute their efforts towards rural revitalization. Although youth have been involved with rural construction and development since the reform-era, the state’s emphasis on ‘revitalization’ provides a new language and new sense of urgency and purpose to increase these youth-focused initiatives.

Meanwhile, the above-discussed concept of ‘involution’ and corresponding desires for the ‘good life’ are also creating new roles and methods for youth to ‘participate’ in the construction of the nation, particularly by *facilitating returns* to the countryside. In the CCYL’s 11-page document, for instance, the term *zhenxing* 振兴 “revitalization” appeared twenty-one times, and *fanxiang* 返乡, “return to the countryside,” seventeen. Each reference to *fanxiang* was used to explain CCYL initiatives and roles of youth in the Party’s revitalization plans, such as assisting both skilled and unskilled migrants to return home, assisting other youth in starting enterprises or finding employment in the countryside, and to assist in agriculture-related entrepreneurship opportunities (Chinese Communist Youth League Central Committee, 2019). The CCYL also laid out certain targets in line with the overall proposed timeline of the Rural Revitalization Strategy, such as the controversially worded goal of facilitating ‘10-million-trips’ by 2022. Included in these ‘10-million-trips’ were those made by the students from Zhejiang University to Heyang and various other parts of Jinyun.

The media write-up for the Heyang visit was equally laden with party jargon. It

described how the visit to the *guminju* was a trip organized specifically to engage the students in a research module to explore the theme: “‘Xiangchou Industries to Enrich the People’ as a Specialty Model to Help Rural Revitalization.” The students are described as having spent a full morning in Heyang, where they were given a tour of the *guminju* by none other than the village’s star tour-guide, Zhu Yunlin. After Heyang, they boarded a bus to the neighbouring village of Gezhu 葛竹村, where they were to ‘learn from’ a post-80s entrepreneur named Zhang Liying, herself a ‘returnee.’ After returning to the motherland following a brief stint in Germany, Zhang re-rooted herself in Hangzhou, where she became a successful entrepreneur. However, Zhang reveals in several media interviews that it was ultimately her *xiangchou* that drew her even closer to her hometown of Xinjian. Coinciding with the local state’s efforts towards revitalization, it was a dream, an initial investment 32 million yuan (US\$4.9 million), and the incessant insistence by the local state that helped her manifest her own vision of ‘poems-and-distant-lands’ in the form of Defeili Manor 德菲利庄园 in the mountainous village of Gezhu. To-date, Defeili is now one of the most successful ‘rural resorts’ in the region, and the most popular for ‘wellness tourism,’ *liaoyanglvyou* 疗养旅游. The students were driven up by bus to Defeili, which sits perched atop a mountain, 700m above sea-level, and just conveniently out of earshot from any sounds of village-life below (Lishui Qingnian, 2018).

Ultimately, after a sojourn down to Heyang and up to the mountainous Gezhu, the students from Zhejiang University are described as having “felt the sentiment of *xiangchou* very deeply for Jinyun County” (Lishui Qingnian, 2018). They allegedly experienced first-hand how it is *xiangchou* that has not only retained the culture of these local rural communities, but, critically, how it is *xiangchou* that motivates the return and reinvestment of entrepreneurs like Zhang to their hometowns. With one final rhetorical embellishment, the article ultimately argues

that the ‘spirit of *xiangchou*,’ *xiangchoujingshen* 乡愁精神, is the ‘golden rice bowl,’ *jinfanwan* 金饭碗, for local residents. This is, of course, a play on words in reference to the communist concept of the iron rice bowl. In Heyang, however, lifetime villagers and even freshly recruited entrepreneurs might beg to differ. One of these newcomers is my informant, Ye Dong.

## 6.4. The New Youth in Heyang

### 6.4.1. Ye Dong:

I met Ye Dong in January 2019. He was born in 1993 in a village near Heyang. His parents were typical duck breeders and shrimp farmers who spent much of their lives out-migrated in Shanghai and Guangdong. They worked in conditions of hardship and did not see much return for their efforts and eventually went back to their home-village. As for Ye Dong, he went to university in Nanchang, the capital city of Jiangxi Province, where he specialized in fine arts. Upon graduation, he remained in the tier-2 city and started his first business venture in the food delivery sector with the money he earned from odd jobs. After a few years of struggle, he eventually found his stride when he partnered with the local branch of the food delivery giant, Meituan 美团. As the founder and CEO of a company that occupied a significant market share of a rapidly growing industry city and nationwide, Ye Dong could be considered ‘successful.’ However, after only two and a half years in this business, he realized a need for change. In his words:

From the perspective of money, it was not too bad, it was stable [...] Although my company was growing, so was the mental and physical stress I began to feel. I was tired. I had work to do, night and day. I was constantly busy. My whole being felt exhausted, I didn’t even have time to eat. Having reached this level of my business, I felt a lot of stress, and added with some other reasons, including some issues with the company itself, I was just under a lot of pressure. I could feel a bottleneck beginning [to form]. [I began wondering] could I, through the money I made outside, could I consider going back? I

also had the scenery of my hometown in mind. [The] environment is relatively nice, my parents are at home, their businesses haven't gone well, and my family's financial conditions aren't ideal... (Ye Dong, May 2020, Interviewed via WeChat)

In the above, Ye Dong was describing his own experience with 'burning out' and the onset of an involuting cycle of ever-increasing input and decreasing output. He worked hard and saw 'success' in establishing his own company, however the pressure and strain involved were rapidly exceeding what he considered to be benefits. This was one of the factors that prompted him to reminisce about his hometown, where tranquility presented itself as more appealing than his rapid pace of life in Nanchang. Meanwhile, his concern for his family and their livelihood was another manifestation of his homesickness, his *xiangchou*. "My parents are at home, I also have a little brother, I wanted to return home, I thought that I should be able to make money on my own at home as well, and this way, I could create better conditions for my family" (Ye Dong, May 2020, Interviewed via WeChat).

Through his networks and expertise in the fine arts world, Ye Dong's first entryway back to Xinjian was a summer art programme he co-founded with a professor from his *alma mater*. In addition to a tourist site, Heyang was also gaining traction throughout the mid-2000 to early 2010's as a *xieshengjidi* 写生基地, a base for visual arts. Ye Dong saw an opportunity in this momentum. With his earnings, he acquired what was at the time a failing hotel that happened to be situated between Heyang and the township. The hotel was built by an investor from Xinjian Township, who had hoped to capitalize on Heyang's emerging tourism market in the mid-2000s. It is worth noting that this investor was also a returnee duck farmer. His 'gamble' paid off, and he succeeded in turning a fairly large profit. It was with his earnings from duck farming that he purchased the hotel, taking a gamble instead with the tourism industry. Unfortunately, Heyang's tourism never did 'emerge' quick enough, and this investor suffered a significant financial loss.

He sold the hotel to Ye Dong at a drastically reduced price, who converted it into an arts camp residency and a home for his family.

After acquiring the building, Ye Dong spent the first few years of his business networking and liaising with other institutions to send their students to Heyang for art programs. According to Ye Dong, successful arts bases in other parts of rural China can see over 1,000 students per day. These programs also help boost the local economy because an increase in visitors means an increase in sales and demand for local shops and services. Moreover, in order to accommodate these students and earn money from their stay, many new rural guesthouses have arisen alongside other related commercial enterprises such as snack stalls, convenience stores, and the like. Seeing the potential of Heyang, Ye Dong hoped to tap into this budding market in a similar fashion.

It was not long before he became aware of the limitations of his arts program. Specifically, as a heritage preservation site, Heyang is under a myriad of regulations over what forms of business development are allowed in and around the village. These regulations prevented Heyang from experiencing a similar growth of industry-chains related to tourism that Ye Dong had witnessed in other sites, which had profited from their natural and historic endowments as artistic muses. He felt the need to seek out other opportunities to grow his business networks and was in frequent contact with local officials, where he was able to build important *guanxi* especially with cadres in the township government. In his account, he was invited to attend a meeting on entrepreneurship in the county, after which he received a phone call from township officials asking if he had interest in renting a shopfront in Heyang's *guminju*. They offered him a choice of either the Bashimenjie or the e-commerce Courtyard. He chose the latter, partly due to its emphasis on youth.

Ye Dong's vision for the shopfront was to open a tearoom, a place where visitors could essentially sit and relax whilst exploring the village, and a nice environment he could use to receive potential business partners and conduct other forms of *guanxi*-building. In his words:

I just wanted a place where one could drink tea. A place that I could consider my workshop. I wanted to create such a place for Heyang, because I've always felt that Heyang does not have a place to rest one's feet. Visitors seem to come, do a little round, then leave straight after. (Group Interview, February 16, 2019, Heyang Village)

One of the first times Ye Dong ever stepped foot in Heyang was in October 2013 when he brought a friend over to visit his hometown. They wound up in Heyang because, aside from the larger and more famous scenic site of Xiandu 仙都,<sup>61</sup> there was nowhere else to go around Xinjian. But when they arrived in Heyang, they realized there was equally nothing to do, *meishigan* 没事干.

The lack of leisure activities in Heyang that Ye Dong described was also a concern for local officials and another point of contention for villagers. Many residents voiced this issue to me on multiple occasions as a way to show their disdain for the tourist endeavor. Whilst cadres and media propaganda continually praised Heyang for its historic and heritage value, residents used the term *meishigan* to describe the tourism site, as if to say that there is nothing 'worth' visiting. According to one informant, "they [tourists] come to Heyang, faff around for an hour or so, and then get right back onto the tour bus." Used in this context, the term *meishigan* takes

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<sup>61</sup> Xiandu Scenic Area is a national '5A' tourist attraction located in Jinyun County. With a name that literally translates to the "capital of the heavens," Xiandu has served as a filming location for various TV and film productions, and claims to be the location where the Yellow Emperor, *huangdi* 皇帝, ascended to the heavens. In fact, the Jinyun County's application to have Xiandu upgraded from '4A' to '5A' took place in 2018, the same year that Heyang attempted its first bid for the designation of '4A.' Xiandu's successful accreditation as '5A' was one of the reasons why Heyang failed to attain '4A' in 2019. Moreover, many local and regional tourism companies offer Heyang's *guminju* as a day-trip add-on to visitors' tours to Xiandu, which has a more developed and mature tourism industry. Similarly, lodgers in Gezhu's Defeili Manor are offered discounted rates to enter Xiandu, some of which are bundled with a quick tour through Heyang's *guminju* as well.

on a different meaning. Instead of highlighting the idleness of the person who is invoking the phrase, or the scarcity of work and employment opportunities in Heyang, it emphasizes the village's lack of commercial and service industries available for tourists. Indeed, at least from the perspective of commercial value, aside from the easy 'grab-and-go' delicacy of Jinyun pancake, there truly were few other objects or memorabilia that inspired visitors to take out their wallets – or, more suited to this age of digital payments, there were few QR payment codes for visitors to scan with their smart phones. As Ye Dong observed, there were few places for visitors to prolong their sojourn in the village, and even fewer activities they could do to enhance their itineraries beyond a quick tour. This was one of the main reasons why various local state organs pushed heavily for opening the commercial hubs at the Bashimenjie and the courtyard. By August 2018, Ye Dong was among a cohort of six other post-80s and 90s entrepreneurs handpicked by the County BOHRSS. Prior to joining the courtyard, they were all strangers to one another. “But now, we’re all really good friends,” said Ye Dong. “I suppose people get close very quickly when you suffer together,” he said with a laugh.

#### 6.4.2. Zhu Zixiao

Like Ye Dong, the other *fanxiangqingnian* had left their respective jobs and lives in cities in Zhejiang and other nearby provinces. None were from Heyang or had any family from the village. However, they all hailed from various regions across Lishui prefecture. Because of this proximity, they spoke about being in Heyang as a form of ‘return.’ Born in 1995, Zhu Zixiao is one of the youngest of the group. Zixiao came to Heyang because, already at the age of 24, she too, felt burnt out. Prior to joining the *guminju*, she worked in a fast-paced and demanding office job for Taobao 淘宝, the online shopping platform owned by e-commerce behemoth, Alibaba. Her office was based in Yongkang, a county-level city in Zhejiang known as the ‘city of metals’

for its production of modern hardware. Even more, she chose to work in Yongkang after turning down a similar offer from an office based in Hangzhou, which is not only known as China's 'Silicon Valley,' but is also where Alibaba is headquartered. Choosing 'comfort' over 'prestige,' she also cited proximity to home and a desire for a slower pace of life as the main reasons she chose the third-tier city of Yongkang over the wealthier and more 'elite' Hangzhou. In a separate interview, she also describes declining Hangzhou because of an 'over-time-phobia,' *jiabankongju* 加班恐惧; in other words, a dreading of the '996' work culture. Yet, even in Yongkang, she felt homesick and overwhelmed by the office clock. Less than a year at work, and she was already daydreaming about her return to Jinyun at the end of her contract in 2018. However, she was uncertain as to what she could do in terms of work. Almost serendipitously, a colleague presented her with the opportunity to quit, return, and earn some income. Her colleague saw opportunity in Heyang's e-commerce courtyard, but because she could not quit her own job and physically move to the village herself, she asked Zixiao instead if she had interest in relocating to the *guminju* as a business partner. For Zixiao, this was not only an opportunity to be even closer to home, but she saw this as a chance to gain some life experience, evade the work grind, and free up time to practice her hobby of photography. As it turns out, the shop she would be managing was a 'Hanfu'-themed photography and costume rental studio (Figure 6).

Made up of the characters, *han* 汉, as in the 'han' ethnicity, and *fu* 服, for garment, the Hanfu is historical clothing that dates back to as early as the Han Dynasty (202BC-220AD), and was worn by the ruling han-ethnic group. Seated near her Hanfu boutique, Zixiao explains how she came to Heyang:

[My colleague] said she applied for this position with the County BOHRSS and was to open this store. But because she had a job and couldn't leave it, she just wanted to find someone who could physically be there. She didn't initially want to open Hanfu photography studio, but she did because this was the only kind of shop allowed. She said that once she won the bid for the shop, it was already decided that it was going to be Hanfu photography. She didn't know at the time that I knew photography, so things worked out. (Group Interview, February 16, 2019, Heyang Village)

With the mention of the Hanfu, it is worth taking a brief detour into what China has recently witnessed as the revival of the traditional costume in contemporary fashion, particularly amongst the late 90s and post-00's generations. As of 2018, this industry was valued at 1.09 billion yuan (US\$156 million). According to Evelyn Wang (2020) for Vogue Business China, there are three key factors that have led to this 'Hanfu mania:' firstly, since 2012, the Chinese government has invested more resources into promoting traditional Chinese culture, and China's youngest cohort of consumers have "eagerly embraced this cultural consumption;" secondly, many offspring of wealthy Chinese families have received education in private institutions that require students to wear Hanfu whilst reciting traditional Chinese poems or reading traditional texts; and thirdly, wearing Hanfu is not just an expression of style, but it is also an embracing of Chinese tradition and a preservation of culture (Wang, 2020). What is even more nationalistic in this revival of the Hanfu is that it is also an active shunning of the Qipao dress, a garment more commonly associated with "traditional Chinese clothing" in both Chinese and Western constructions of "Chineseness" through fashion, and one that is also frequently sexualized. Aside from their difference in styles the Qipao also differs in that it is a clothing-style with aristocratic Manchu origins during the Qing-era – thereby being foreign and reminiscent of a time China was under 'foreign rule;' it was a fashion made popular by elite women in Republican-era Shanghai – thereby being elitist and a reminder of a China that was under the governance of the Republican party, as opposed to the CCP; and it was a dress that

was banned altogether during Mao-era China for its ties to feudalism and dynastic aristocracy – thereby being foreign, ‘bourgeois,’ and feudalistic (Heroldová, 2014). Conversely, the Hanfu is distinctly *Han-Chinese*, and it fits neatly into the nationalistic discourse of China’s great cultural revival and nationalistic ‘rejuvenation’ – itself a form of *xiangchou* for a Chinese culture that is dictated by the Party-state’s hegemonic reclamation of what is “traditionally Chinese.” Therefore, it is not surprising that the Hanfu fit neatly into the local state’s criteria for ‘embodying and promoting *xiangchou*,’ and, more importantly, that the “Hanfu experience” needed to be sold as part of the Heyang experience.

As part of the experience, consumers could rent a Hanfu costume suited to their liking for a set amount of time and use the *guminju* as their backdrop for the ultimate transcendental photoshoot: to capture themselves in a traditional Chinese fairytale-*esque* aesthetic, a highly staged and aestheticized rural life. It is an experience where, surrounded by buildings with over thousands of years of history, they can memorialize a moment of temporal, spatial, and cultural transcendence back to another time and into a traditional culture now made trendy. It is truly the *shi-he-yuan-fang*, ‘poems-and-distant-lands.’ It is the consumption of a form of cultural nostalgia, where villages like Heyang become the backdrop. As for Zixiao, who is now in the business of facilitating this consumption and the enactment of tradition and culture, she quickly warmed to Heyang. In her words: “I feel as though I am tied to Heyang by fate. The courtyard where I now work has a layout that is identical to those in my *laojia* 老家 [hometown] that’s why I say I was brought here by fate, it just feels very *qinjie* 亲切, [close and intimate]” (Group Interview, February 16, 2019, Heyang village). Perhaps for Zixiao, it is fair to say that Heyang embodies for her a form of *xiangchou* – a return ‘home.’ Despite it not being her exact *laojia*, this is where she felt more at ease, and indeed, closer to her ideals of a ‘good life.’

### 6.4.3. Fan Yongming and Chen Yangkai

Fan Yongming and Chen Yangkai are two other *fanxiangqingnian* who run boutiques in the e-commerce courtyard. Born in 1995, Fan Yongming worked previously in several different jobs in cities including Shanghai, Zhejiang's port city of Ningbo, and Guangdong province's Dongguan, an industrial hub in China's Pearl River Delta. Reflecting on his time in Shanghai, he recalls a nine-to-nine workday whilst living in humble and challenging conditions. Unable to afford rent in the country's cosmopolitan hub, he lived on a balcony for several months in a small flat shared by several others with backgrounds similar to his. In effect, they created and lived in a small 'ant colony' of their own. In his words:

In terms of the big cities I've stayed in, [there was] Ningbo, Shanghai, Dongguan, these three places. They were all pretty much the same. When I was at Ningbo, I suppose I was still a student and working on the side. Let's talk about Shanghai. In Shanghai, I went to work at 9am and didn't get to go home until 9pm. What I experienced left a bad taste in my mouth. I even lived on a balcony for over two months because the rent there was simply too expensive, there was absolutely no way I could afford anything half-way decent. In fact, when I first arrived in Shanghai, my wallet got stolen, my phone got stolen; I didn't have a penny. I spent that night sleeping on the footpath of a subway station. It was only the second day when I was able to contact my friend, who let me crash at his place. I stayed there for about a month, but our relations started to sour. That's how I ended up co-living with a group of others like me. I only got the balcony. In any case, I don't have warm feelings towards big cities.

Yongming is an active Hanfu enthusiast with a fairly large online following. City woes aside, he explains how his primary motivation for relocating to Heyang was to promote Hanfu culture both online and offline, and he hoped to create a business and a brand that could ride the coattails of Heyang's tourism industry. He had been to Heyang several times to attend various Hanfu social 'meetups' for online enthusiast communities. "I genuinely liked this place," he said, reflecting on how he found the pace of life to be slower, and the environment more forgiving.

Like Zixiao, he also mentioned how the courtyard reminded him of his grandmother's home. "I thought this was a place where I could merge both business and passion." Therefore, upon hearing about the courtyard initiative through word of mouth, he immediately reached out to the County BOHRSS. After his application was received, he was invited to a discussion with the director alongside five other cadres of the BOHRSS to detail his business plan and confirm that his shop would focus on Hanfu. He was also told that the shop right next to his would be his direct business rival, which as we now know, is the shop manned by Zixiao. Despite providing the exact same service in such a limited space, they had a very amiable and cooperative business dynamic. Tourists would rent clothing from Yongming but pay for Zixiao's photography service; or they would scan a QR payment code for the dresses they rented from Yongming and hop over to Zixiao's where they would similarly scan a code to purchase the intricate hairpieces that the young entrepreneur learnt to handmade in preparation for her move

to Heyang as a ‘return entrepreneur,’ and as a *fanxiangqingnian*.

Although Yongming and Zixiao got along harmoniously, their main ‘competitor’ was actually another Hanfu shop run by a couple from Xinjian along the Bashimenjie. In addition to being in a location that naturally sees higher foot traffic from tourists, this shop appeared to be the more favored in the eyes of the local state. This was partly because it was directly overseen by the MC and the VDC. By contrast, the e-commerce courtyard was mainly managed by the County MORHSS, whose representatives were the least involved with Heyang overall. Therefore, during events hosted by the MC or the VDC, it was the shopkeepers on the Bashimenjie who the leadership sought out to collaborate with. And, as it turns out, dressing in Hanfu became an almost indispensable part of all events hosted in the *guminju* to promote Heyang’s *xiangchou*. This intra-store rivalry, although seemingly trivial, brings to light another



Figure 6: A ‘Hanfu’ shop in Heyang  
Photo by author

issue facing the young entrepreneurs, which is the fact that the very existence of the e-commerce courtyard is, to a certain extent, performative. As mentioned above, the entire project was conceived of as a “pilot site” for the county to test out initiatives for youth entrepreneurship in a traditional village-setting like Heyang. Since the fanfare surrounding the site’s inauguration in November 2018, however, the youth have felt more or less ignored by local officials. The exception is when other delegations of cadres, entrepreneurs, or even students are brought by. In July 2019, for instance, a delegation of 40 cadres came to visit the courtyard. This delegation was formed by the Provincial BOHRSS as part of a leadership training camp for “Collaboration Between Entrepreneurship and Rural Revitalization,” an initiative that, according to reporter Sun Pengfei (2019), aimed to “foster a group of trailblazers” that can merge entrepreneurship with revitalization and “help realize the overall revitalization efforts of the province” (Sun, 2019). Over two days, the delegation gathered in Jinyun to pay official visits to sites deemed as ‘exemplary models’ of revitalization, including the e-commerce courtyard, where Yongming and the others were expected to ‘show face’ and entertain – an act that irritated the already irate Chen Yangkai.

“What should I put as my occupation?” said Yangkai, as he filled out the general questionnaire we administered to our interviewees.<sup>62</sup> “Would ‘Cultural ambassador’ have a ‘higher *bige* 逼格’ [appear posher]?” (Group Interview, February 16, 2019, Heyang Village). Twenty-seven years of age, Yangkai is another entrepreneur in the courtyard. With an eye and appreciation for design and architecture, his boutique specialized in functional and decorative art pieces, such as contemporary sculptures made of ‘traditional’ material. Prior to Heyang,

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<sup>62</sup> At the beginning of each focus group interview, my colleagues and I asked the participants to fill out a simple questionnaire that asked for their age, gender, employment, and level of education. See chapter 3, p. 80 for further details on our research methodology.

Yangkai worked for three years in Hangzhou and then two years in the county seat of Jiaojiang, in Zhejiang's Taizhou City. In Jiaojiang, he worked in a major telecommunications firm. As the others, he cited the fast-paced lifestyle of Hangzhou as a major reason for his gradual move from bustling tier-two city, to a modest county-seat, and finally, to an ancient-heritage village.

In his words:

I like the rural lifestyle. I stayed in Hangzhou for three years, and then in Jiaojiang for two years. In the two years in Jiaojiang, I never really left my house. Other than going to work, I just stayed at home. In the three years I lived in Hangzhou, [I found] the pace of life way too fast. I really don't like fast-paced lifestyles, I like a slow and leisurely [lifestyle]. (Group Interview, February 16, 2019, Heyang Village)

Despite preferring to be in Heyang, Yangkai appeared as the most jaded of the group. A slow and leisurely life is one thing, but to have absolutely *meishigan* is another. In fact, at the same time of noting the low number of tourists and customers that pass through the e-commerce courtyard, he made a point to highlight how there were many cadres that were brought over to their boutiques by the County BOHRSS or even by leaders of the MC and VDC. Rolling his eyes whilst lighting a cigarette, Yangkai says:

I'll be frank, [officials and cadres] come here just so they can show off to a group of people. At the end of the day, this is just for show. Have they ever engaged us in any activities? No. Has the MC involved us in any of their events? Also no. Everything we do is on our own, except for when the MC comes, then we have to put on a show. (Group Interview, February 16, 2019, Heyang Village)

Yangkai was certainly bitter about these cadre visits and explained how these drop-ins actually cost the entrepreneurs more than they earned. Although not as critical as Yangkai, the others agreed that these official 'evaluation visits' from cadres demanded their compliance as parts of the performance that is designed to boost the interests of party members who are either trying

to show-off Heyang's tourism enterprise to cadres from other jurisdictions, seeking to impress officials from higher-up with the hopes of receiving more funding, or, most likely, hoping to be promoted themselves. The arrival of leaders brings the expectation that the entrepreneurs should contribute their own resources in the form of gifts, refreshments, and their time and hospitality. In turn, these acts of hospitality help the village cadres and leaders build 'face' and better *guanxi* with their guests. The entrepreneurs, however, get little in return. Even more, Yangkai was of the opinion that it should be the state that supported the entrepreneurs, however, after arriving to Heyang, he soon realized that it was the other way around; the local state fully depended upon the *fanxiangqingnian* to liven up Heyang's tourism and boost its economy. Despite not being directly in charge of the courtyard, representatives of the MC even came breathing down their necks periodically, insisting they host some events to 'make some noise.' In Yangkai's words:

[The government] is concerned with heritage protection, they aren't building anything new. I feel as though the MC's intention is to rely on us to enliven the site, they want us to organize events, they're always harping on us to hold events, to 'produce some noise.' But Heyang itself doesn't have any unique characteristics that can attract people [...] The government hasn't given us any [resources]. If they want to rely on us to bring some liveliness [*renqi* 人气], it isn't feasible. [Development] relies primarily on the MC to build some new points of attraction for Heyang. (Group Interview, February 16, 2019, Heyang Village)

Yangkai's comment on Heyang's inability to draw in more visitors and revenue is consistent with earlier discussions about the ongoing tension between 'heritage protection' and 'tourism development' (see Chapter 2, p. 71). It concerns the issue of 'authenticity' versus 'profitability,' 'conservation' versus 'commercialization.' In a way, the *fanxiangqingnian* found themselves caught in between these tensions, and they have been brought in almost as the 'solution' to help rectify Heyang's lack of foot traffic and patrons. However, with little revenue, and few

resources of their own, what they could do was limited. Nevertheless, top-down pressure to put on events meant that they needed to get creative. During my fieldwork, for instance, I saw them host livestream videos on the social media app *Douyin* 抖音, where Yongming played the Chinese zither slowly and meditatively, whilst dressed in Hanfu. With Heyang's traditional courtyard as his backdrop and a stream of incense smoke billowing by his side, this was a display of 'hashtag' *xiangchou*.

#### 6.4.4. Stationed in the Basin of Nostalgia, but Looking Ahead for a Future

When the group interview involving these entrepreneurs took place, they had spent nearly half a year in the *guminju*. From August 2018 to February 2019, they experienced both the high and low seasons of tourism, the cold and the even colder months of Heyang. By this point, all of them expressed similar sentiments of simultaneous happiness and hardship, feelings of tranquility and tedium. In other words, the courtyard was where they worked hard and hardly worked. One of the biggest issues the entrepreneurs had with the courtyard was the absence of heating, a common feature in places south of the Yangtze River. However, because of the strict renovation restrictions placed upon these ancient dwellings in the name of heritage preservation, the installation of air conditioning units was not allowed. Instead, I frequently came to the courtyard to find all seven of the entrepreneurs in Ye Dong's small studio, where they huddled around two medium-sized fans that could blow hot air in the cold seasons, and cold in the hot. According to Zixiao, although she had no overall complaints about working in the *guminju* – because, it was the desire for a slower pace of life that brought her here, after all – she did say, semi-jokingly, that the biggest difference in her quality of life working in Heyang versus in her office in Yongkang was the issue of *wenbao* 温饱. Made up of the characters 'wen' for warmth and 'bao' for fullness, this is a clever play on words, as *wenbao* is a shorthand term that speaks

to the base line of subsistence in China for having clothing on one's back and food in one's belly. To live above the poverty line means to have one's basic *wenbao* guaranteed. However, in Zixiao's usage, she means having no *wen*, 'heat,' due to the lack adequate heating units, and having no *bao*, 'fullness,' due to the lack of food options in and around the *guminju*. On this latter point, she clarifies that because they are required to stay in their shops the entire working day, there are limited dining options. "Sure, you can eat a *shaobing* now and then," Zixiao said, "but for a whole year?" Ye Dong also chimed in to say that because they are overseen by the County BOHRSS, they feel neither eligible nor comfortable to eat in the canteen of the MC, where most of the cadres, village leaders, and other personnel who work in the tourism site dine for lunch. For supper, however, the entrepreneurs frequently ate in Ye Dong's hotel with his family, or they would take a trip into the township and sometimes even further afar to Zixiao's old haunt of Yongkang for a livelier night out.

Despite all having chosen to relocate to Heyang, none had anticipated that things would be as *xinku* 辛苦, full of hardship, especially during the low seasons of tourism and cold months of the village. In Yongming's words:

I predicted that it would be relatively *xinku*. However, when the reality of working here was placed before me, that was when I realized how truly *xinku* this really was, it is much more challenging than I had predicted. Whether it's [the lack of] tourists, or the logistics of running my own business – which, of course, has a lot of issues as well [...] I just didn't think I would invest my whole physical and mental being into this. (Group Interview, February 16, 2019, Heyang village)

Meanwhile, according to Ye Dong, who was more familiar with Heyang than the others, this was a scenario that he anticipated before opening his shop. "Because I have been in and around Heyang for longer," he reasoned, "I of course knew that there would not be many people. I knew that it would mostly just be the few of us here." This was an issue he even warned the

other entrepreneurs of, but by that point, contracts had already been signed. “I only met them after they signed their contracts, I didn’t even have their WeChats before this” Ye Dong said with a laugh, as the others shot playful daggers at him with their eyes.

Boredom came with a cost. During the low seasons, there were very few tourists who came to Heyang at all, meaning there were even fewer who came to visit their courtyard. Within this small trickle of foot traffic, even fewer converted into business transactions and income for the entrepreneurs. Furthermore, except in cases where tourists were led by a tour guide, very few found their way into the courtyard on their own, as its entrance was relatively hidden. At least during my visits to Heyang, I hardly noticed any signage or guiding posts that indicated the existence of the courtyard. On some days, not a single visitor wandered through, and on these days, there was truly nothing to do, *meishigan*. When asked to speak about what it is like running his business in Heyang, Ye Dong used the following to describe a typical day:

A day in the life of an entrepreneur in the e-commerce courtyard: open the shop, organize some stuff, chat with the others, and then... and then I sit there. There’s nothing much to do beyond that. Maybe I’ll go out to take some photos. Well, basically, low seasons are longer than high seasons for tourism. In a year of 365 days, maybe 300 of those days won’t have many people. Yes, it’s very boring. Also, when it’s the summertime, we won’t have air-conditioning either, we aren’t allowed to install air-conditioning units, and the internet speed isn’t great. So, other than, say, visiting each other’s shops – I will try on a Hanfu from [Yongming’s] shop, he’ll come and use my art supplies to paint a painting or something – when we get bored of that, we are left with the realization that there is truly nothing left for us to do or play with. On top of this, we don’t even have any economic benefits. So, in all honesty, [Zixiao] and Yongming, they stay in the courtyard more than I do. I’m only here for short amounts of time, because each time I come, I’m reminded of how truly boring it is. (Ye Dong, May 2020, Interviewed remotely via WeChat)

The scene above does not inspire much enthusiasm in the e-commerce endeavor. Although most desired to stay, there was an air of uncertainty that hung over their futures with Heyang.

In the end, Yangkai settled on *ziyouzhiyezhe* 自由职业者, ‘free-lancer,’ as his occupation. “That means I don’t have a job” he joked. He may not have been out of work, but there was truth in the fact that he did not have much work. In his words, the lack of customers was “already becoming an issue concerning his own survival.” Similarly, Yongming also feared that he could not sustain his livelihood in both the short and medium terms if he continued to stay in Heyang. Having not even been in operation for a full year, the lack of income was worrying, and he began looking for his next move. “I think things will get better for me after this moment of time passes” he said, “because I have already decided to leave.” Even Yongming’s parents were “doing mental work on him” (*zuoxinligongzuo* 做心理工作), with the hopes that he’d consider a more ‘proper’ career, such as the jobs he had previously worked in, in cities like Shanghai. “As long as my salary is stable, they will be at ease,” he said, before further revealing that it was ultimately to a steady, white-collar office job that his parents hoped he’d return. Nevertheless, when asked if he preferred the ‘big city life’ or living in the more tranquil Heyang, Yongming favored the latter. “After I’ve come back, from the wages to the environment, I feel a big difference from the big cities, but I think I’m more suited to this kind of place” (Group Interview, February 18, 2019, Heyang Village).

Yongming’s realization and his parent’s cautious concern is an experience shared by the ‘return youth’ depicted in an article by Peter Yang (2020) as well. Yang’s research is based in a southwestern village known as Fairwind, which welcomed 20 new post-80s and 90s youth as its residents in the late 2010s. Seeking a change from their ‘involuting’ lives, these youth went to Fairwind to, on the one hand, reject mainstream values and expectations, and on the other hand, “regain a sense of control and rekindle their feelings of hope for the future” (Yang, 2020). Yang (2020) ultimately argues that although they may have found solace in these ‘greener

pastures,' such an escape was only temporary. A lack of earnings and a dwindling savings account brought the realization that "Fairwind isn't so much an escape from 'suspension' as another waystation" (para. 19). Whether suspended or involuted, the condition is, again, a 'stuckedness' (Hage, 2009) that is also evident in Yongming's case. Despite having physically relocated to the supposed 'poems and distant lands,' Yongming, and those interviewed by Yang, were faced with the question: what's next?

As for Ye Dong, he was also in the midst of plotting his next step: an exit strategy from the *siheyuan* and the tourist site. During the Group Interview in 2019, he was still unclear of what this route would be, and when asked about future plans, he only replied with resignation that "one wrong step has led to multiple wrong steps," so he was unsure as to where to go. At the time of this writing, however, Ye Dong had indeed left his shop in Heyang. "There are many restrictions specific to Heyang," Ye Dong explained. In addition to the restrictions imposed on the village by virtue of being a nationally protected heritage site, he also listed the very fragmented governing structure as the other major factors that render Heyang a more complicated place to start and grow a business. "There is little sense of autonomy here," he said, before explaining that he has since relocated his venture to another village further up from Heyang, where he sees more opportunities for growth, a better environment for collaboration with officials, and where he hopes to continue living within his 'poems-and-distant-lands.'

Zixiao was one of the few who was certain she would stay in Heyang. She came to Heyang to avoid such phenomena as '996' and 'involution,' and in the village, she had grown accustomed to a 'work life' that was not dictated by the protracted capitalistic clock of white-collar corporatism. "Maybe I'm a misfit," she says in a separate interview, "most youth probably choose 'hustle' as their keyword, whereas a slow-paced life such as this one in Heyang might

be perceived as a life of retirement” (Beijing Youth Report, 2019). Despite inconsistent income from the tourist site, Zixiao explained how she was able to sustain herself with a side business of providing remote photo and video editing services. Although she felt like a social outcast, she ultimately saw her life as one of enjoyment. Sat in the courtyard, she says:

I enjoy life here. It’s slow. After opening this business, I have been living the life of a retiree. After coming here, I can’t even feel time anymore. I don’t even know what day it is now. (Group Interview, February 18, 2019, Heyang Village)

In fact, for most of the entrepreneurs, the longer they spent in Heyang, the more they felt their lives were also gradually swallowed by the sedate routine of the village’s seniors – their days marked by a routine interspersed by the passing of tourists, the occasional media crew, and visiting cadres, looking to capture, consume, or construct *xiangchou*.

### **6.5. Conclusion: From *Zhiqing* Nostalgia to *Xiangchou***

When I visited Heyang in 2019, I noticed how a Qipao rental shop that used to operate beside the Wall of Horse Heads had been replaced by a small convenience store that sold a humble assortment of snacks and bottled beverages. This Qipao rental shop was previously run by a woman in her mid-50s out of her own heritage home. When I interviewed her earlier in the summer of 2018, a few months before the arrival of the new entrepreneurs, she explained to me how she had returned to Heyang after years of duck breeding to take care of her ageing mother. She began her Qipao business around 2014 because she saw some potential in the tourism endeavor and hoped it could be a way for her to remain at home and help put food on the table. When I searched for her in 2019, however, I was told she had left again to breed ducks.

Indeed, the commercialization of the Bashimenjie and the courtyard produced mixed feelings amongst local villagers, and the anecdote above illustrates how a local was ‘squeezed

out' by newcomers. These newcomers, the *fanxiangqingnian*, were not only perceived to be more competitive than her because of their various urban experiences, their engagement with technology, and their higher levels of education – indeed, their higher social and cultural capital – but they also received more financial assistance and other forms of benefits from the local state, which ultimately favored their enterprises over the locals', due to the fact that the *fanxiangqingnian* also served the purpose of advancing other political agendas. In fact, the initial recruitment of outsiders to fill the shops along the Bashimenjie and the courtyard angered many locals, who not only felt excluded from the tourism economy, but also felt discriminated against. Suffice it to say, wires were certainly crossed as many locals were under the impression that the MC and the VDC looked down on the people of Heyang, and only allowed 'educated outsiders' to operate shops within the *guminju*. Whether these inequalities existed only in locals' *perceptions* or if they were truly embedded in policies and reified by local cadres further highlights the gaps across the urban-rural *spectrum* through the lens of subjectivity, embodied *suzhi*, and concepts of relative selfhood. Within what is ultimately an *encounter* between the 'outsiders' and the local rural residents, these points of tension and (self)reckoning are also prevalent in the phenomenon of 'student volunteerism,' where, under such initiatives as the *sanxiang* social practice program or Zhejiang University's 'Educated-youth plan,' students take service trips to the countryside as an *authentic* act of 'self-sacrifice' and philanthropy, but to both positive and perhaps questionable effect for the 'educators' and those 'being educated,' who might perceive their arrivals with suspicion.

The language and ideals embedded within not only volunteer programs, but also the language used to encourage return entrepreneurship in such programs as those implemented in Heyang, are tied to the language used to construct a Mao-era ethos of 'self-sacrifice' and urban-

rural relations. In fact, as illustrated through the local state's promotion of "Xiangchou Industries" to students from Zhejiang University, in the absence of the 'socialist' state's provision of the iron rice bowl, *xiangchou* – both a form of affective and commercial economy – was revered as the 'golden rice bowl.' Furthermore, the reverence of Xi Jinping as a former *zhiqing*, 'educated youth,' is a direct result of a Mao-campaign and is a constant reminder of its historical existence; however, it is also a proactive reconstruction of its historical significance. Since his ascent to power, entire book series, short documentaries, television dramas, and tourist attractions have been created out of Xi's seven years as an educated youth in the village of Liangjiahe 梁家河 in Shaanxi Province, all of which go to great lengths to detail his true 'desire to work for the people' as he toiled alongside the peasantry. For instance, an entire book series, *Xi Jinping's Seven Years as an Educated Youth*, was published by the Central Party School Press in August 2017. As indicated in the title, this publication details Xi's years as an educated youth, and it promptly became included as another 'essential' component of 'learning from Xi' (*xuexi* 学习) literature for party cadres (Reuters, 2017, para. 3). Xi's experience as a *zhiqing* is built into his presidential persona as the 'man of the people' – a leader who has also 'eaten bitterness' and therefore understands 'the plight of the commonfolk.' The spirit of Mao-era self-sacrifice that was supposedly cultivated through the countryside experience has been built into the ideological indoctrination of current cadres, and the CCYL has been the ultimate vehicle to groom young, aspiring cadres through volunteer programs, and in the facilitation of 'return youth,' *fanxiangqingnian*.

Ultimately, whether a tale of inspiration or another form of indoctrination, that Xi Jinping spent several of his most formative years doing manual labor alongside farmers in Liangjiahe is undeniable. And it is this personal experience in the countryside that provides the

grounds for Xi to speak so frequently and fervently of his own *xiangchou*. Most importantly, as the ‘paramount leader’ of the state, it is this *xiangchou* that has influenced the entire understanding and construction of Xiangchou with a ‘capital X.’ Furthermore, while it is certainly understandable, if not, convenient, to fully attribute the ‘revival of red’ to the ‘rise of Xi,’ a red revival did not necessarily begin as a top-down imposition and full political campaign *per se*. Scholars including Wang Ban (1998), Geremie Barme (1999), Guobin Yang (2003), David J. Davies (2005), among many others, have discussed the phenomenon of ‘red nostalgia’ or ‘totalitarian nostalgia’ long before the dawn of this administration. Rather than being solely a political campaign orchestrated and fuelled from the top-down, Guobin Yang (2016) reiterates in one of his later publications that ‘red nostalgia’ was very much a grassroots and popular movement throughout the 1990s – it was a structure of feeling, I might add.

Various forms of nostalgia emerged throughout the 1990s as a result of the dizzying, disorienting, and disarming transformations during reforms. According to Yang (2003), the former *zhiqing* were among the most vulnerable to these changes (p. 274), and this generation, born around the 50s, was overcome by a powerful *zhiqing* nostalgia. Although they had all faced hardship in their experiences in the countryside as youth, few were prepared for the uncertainties and anxieties that came with China’s transition from a planned to a (quasi-)market economy, and the accompanying cocktail of new social problems, new values, new human relations, and new constructions of identity, of self-hood and of nationhood (Yang, 2003). Analysis of *zhiqing* literature (see for instance Yang, 2003; Chirita, 2014; Bonnin, 2016) reflect how the sense of identity crisis was a generational phenomenon, as “revolutionary asceticism” was replaced by materialism (Yang, 2003, p. 273), collectivism by individualism, and devotion to the CCP by fanaticism for the RMB. One of the ways in which *zhiqing* nostalgia was actualized and

articulated was through the physical return to the countryside. In other words, it was in the countryside where a disoriented generation sought to revisit not only past acquaintances, friends, and landscapes, but it was ultimately in the countryside where they hoped to revisit their past selves.

Indeed, Karl Marx once wrote: “Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce” (Marx, 1852). Therefore, if the “Down to the Countryside Movement” was a tragedy, then for many of the disillusioned *zhiqing* who hoped to revisit the countryside years later, nostalgia’s deceptive reassurance of ‘sameness’ and familiarity was a farce. That is, what they sought in their physical return was a countryside firmly rooted in the past and which existed only as such – in fragmented memories. This specific ‘rural,’ romanticized through the lens of the *zhiqing* subjectivity, existed only in their personal and subjective histories, as much as it was part of a radically different ideological and political ‘past.’ Moreover, as if a mirror to the present, whilst the *zhiqing* generation turned to the countryside to revisit and reencounter their pasts, the present-day cohort of *fanxiangqingnian* is now leaving for the countryside with certain visions and ideals for their futures. If nostalgia oriented the *zhiqing* generation backwards to make sense of dizzying processes of change, *xiangchou* is a lens that can be used to understand a new wave of rural return not only as a bottom-up desire for ‘inner-revolution’ amidst an age of ‘involution,’ but also a top-down strategy to encourage rural revitalization for national rejuvenation. And indeed, if the DTCM was a tragedy, then hopefully the combination of bottom-up desires to return and top-down imperatives to facilitate such returns can be not a farce, but a *force* towards true urban-rural reconciliation.

Although the first cohort of Heyang’s e-commerce courtyard did not necessarily flourish

financially, at least for the most part, Ye Dong, Zixiao, Yongming and Yangkai felt welcome and included in the *guminju*. Most importantly, they got along with their rural hosts, residents in their late 60s to 80s who still live in and own the usage rights to the individual units within the courtyard. According to Zixiao, she felt close to the elders and felt treated like a granddaughter. To be sure, this harmonious synergy between the old residents and the newcomers took some time to build, however, after a few months of interaction, life in the e-commerce courtyard was best embodied by the following image: local elders watch CCTV news on the single TV in the courtyard, while the *fanxiangqingnian* work on their laptops beside them. Separated by generations and bridging urban-rural cultures, they are all looking silently at their screens, the rural elders with their eyes to the LED flatscreen mounted on the wooden walls, and the urban(ized) youth with their attention on their smaller, more mobile screens. Sometimes all the entrepreneurs are found seated around the same wooden table beside the elderly, who are perched on wooden stools. The tranquility of this scene is disrupted only by a group of tourists, whose tour guide is now standing between the elders and their TV to explain the historic value of this courtyard and the commercial value of the *fanxiangqingnian*.

## Chapter 7. Conclusion

Between lockdowns and shutdowns, pandemic uncertainties and infodemic anxieties, demand for ‘rural escapes’ grew in 2020 as middle-class urban dwellers sought not only refuge from densely crowded spaces, but also turned towards the bucolic for a peace of mind. According to data collected by AirDNA and SyncBNB, two data analytics platforms for global short-term rentals, “[a]s soon as lockdown restrictions were lifted, city dwellers across the globe looked to escape from the city” (Brace, 2021). Within the hospitality industry, the term “cityscaper,” a combination of “city” and “escaper,” even emerged to define how “city dwellers [were] fleeing high-risk Coronavirus zones and booking long-term stays in remote rural hideaways” (Koetsier, 2020, para. 1). Yet, such desires to ‘return to nature’ are anything but new, and the countryside has long been romanticized by city-dwellers as a place to seek temporary refuge from the stresses of constructed environments. As Jonathan Freeland (2020) reports, the coronavirus “did not remake the global landscape so much as reveal what was already there” (para. 5). Indeed, far from reconfiguring the urban-rural relationship, the pandemic merely rendered more visible what already was: a global mental health crisis amid what Raymond Williams (1993) has long observed as the problematic *separation* of ‘the country and the city.’

### 7.1 *Xiangchou* as a Framework and as a Keyword

Amidst this ‘separation,’ this dissertation probes a critical “turning point” within contemporary China’s development. The focus on *xiangchou*, meanwhile, allowed for a study of this turning point from the vantage points of both the top-down and the bottom-up. The chapters of this dissertation have explored multiple planes of anthropogenic and ‘inner crises’

to characterize this turning point as a simultaneous refocusing on the countryside as a developmental priority from the standpoint of a political economic imperative for the Chinese State on the one hand; and, on the other hand, a discursive turn that reframes the countryside as not only a romanticized escape, but also a viable and desirable option as a place to live and work in.

However, the case study of the ancient heritage village of Heyang in Xinjian Township, Jinyun County, Lishui City, Zhejiang Province has illustrated the complexities, competing and contradicting interests, and the micro- and macro-level challenges that need to be considered both within the top-down imperatives for ‘rural revitalization’ and ‘national rejuvenation,’ as well as the various individual desires for more ‘holistic’ lives across the urban-rural spectrum and the socioeconomic divides within and in-between. In fact, Heyang’s struggle to be both a tourist site and a ‘living village,’ *yigehuodecunluo* 一个活的村落, has also revealed the contradictions within the concept of *xiangchou* itself. Employing the Extended Case Method to weave in and out of Heyang, this dissertation has used *xiangchou* as both an object of study and a lens for study to, in the words of Burawoy (2009), “move from heaven to earth through the study of microfoundations of macroprocesses” and vice versa (p. 10). From Beijing to Heyang, I traced the ‘trickling down’ of *xiangchou* from discourse to policy. From Heyang’s duck breeders back up to Xi Jinping, I have also discussed the various ways in which villages like Heyang become targets of various subjectivities’ *xiangchou*.

Ultimately, this dissertation is at once a probing of a turning point within China’s developmental path, as well as an attempt to propose and define *xiangchou* as a critical keyword in contemporary Chinese society. Through various stories and voices that represent experiences and desires for ‘rural return,’ I argue that *xiangchou* – a deeply rooted cultural concept – is both

effective in its usage and affective by nature, and it therefore sits at the intersection of various return-flows to the countryside that are shaping and taking form as a result of this developmental turning point in villages like Heyang. In this concluding chapter, I redefine *xiangchou* and revisit some of its key interpretations throughout my main chapters. I address the limitations of this research, and also highlight several questions that this dissertation raises, which could prove fruitful for future research on not only contemporary China, but also conceptions surrounding the urban-rural divide and the notion(s) of modernity.

### 7.2. 'Notes towards the Definition' of *Xiangchou*

This dissertation began with the seemingly simple question: what is *xiangchou*? While most frequently equated to the sentiment of 'nostalgia' in the English language, I used the example of the Portuguese term *saudade* to make the argument for the 'untranslatability' of *xiangchou* and to highlight its cultural rootedness and 'Chineseness.' At the same time, however, I posited *xiangchou* as not only a critical cultural 'keyword' in contemporary Chinese discourses, but I also referred to psychologist Tim Lomas' Positive Lexicology Project to extend the relevance and resonance of *xiangchou* beyond the Chinese language. In other words, *xiangchou* is 'uniquely Chinese' but also 'universally human.' *Xiangchou* is 'untranslatable' only in the sense that there is no exact equivalent of the term in the English language, but it is 'universal' in the sense that the meanings, desires, and sentiments it conveys transcends the parameters of language and even culture. Moreover, because of its salience not only throughout Chinese literary and cultural history, but also its contemporary resonance – within the 'party line' and the 'mass line,' (which have arguably separated), and, not to mention, even the state's 'bottom-line' – it is a worthy endeavor to revisit the 'meaning' of *xiangchou* as well as what it means to 'have *xiangchou*,' both individually and as a civilization.

### 7.2.1. What is ‘Xiangchou?’

While I have been writing this dissertation, a proliferation of research within China have emerged precisely to discuss the meaning of *xiangchou*. With a visit through Heyang now in mind, it is perhaps fitting – albeit, at the risk of being unconventional – to conclude this dissertation with a brief revisit to the literature on *xiangchou*, which is not only growing in terms of volume, but also in academic significance within China. This proliferation of Chinese language research not only adds further credence to the claim for *xiangchou* as a critical keyword, but it also highlights the various ongoing attempts to untangle the ambiguities that surround the term, its understanding, and its usage.

In 2018, Wang Xinge et al. published an article in the Chinese language journal, *Renwen Dili* 人文地理 [Human Geography] entitled, “Guoneiwai xiangchou xiangguan yanjiu jinzhan ji qishi 国内外乡愁相关研究进展及启示,” which they translated in English as “Review of Nostalgia Research.” The article was a comprehensive literature review of the recent research on *xiangchou* within mainland Chinese academic circles, as well as an overview on how the term is being defined and written about. Based on their findings, Wang et al. (2018) argue that it was only in 2013 when Chinese researchers began to take a more robust interest in the sentiment as a subject for academic and theoretical study. To support this claim, they highlight that there were only 153 articles that discussed *xiangchou* in 2013, but following its incorporation into ‘official language,’ this number grew to 821 articles in 2016.

As this dissertation has also argued, Wang et al. (2018) propose that it was especially after the CCP’s Central Urbanization Work Conference, held in 2013, when research on *xiangchou* began to grow within the academic sphere. Even more, they explicitly referenced Xi Jinping’s utterance of “let citizens see mountains, gaze at waters, and keep *xiangchou* in mind”

as an academic point of departure (p. 2). The authors also attribute the significance of and interest in *xiangchou* post-2013 to the following developmental context:

The interest in *xiangchou* within our country emerged from the context where there is concern over the problems that have resulted from rapid urbanization as well as the need to improve the quality of urbanization. Therefore, [*xiangchou*] is a deeper reflection on urbanization. Under this framework, scholars within China have begun discussions on how to define *xiangchou*... (Wang, Chen, Lin, & Wang, 2018, p. 2)

Conversely, they argue that it is necessary for research on *xiangchou* to flourish, as grasping the concept is integral to development and the achievement of so-called “human-centric urbanization.” In effect, *xiangchou* is not just a ‘nostalgic longing’ for the countryside, but it is very much a concern over the way in which development has taken form overall. They therefore proceeded to summarize various interpretations of *xiangchou* in the attempt to produce a workable definition of an otherwise subjective term. Based on their review of the relevant literature, *xiangchou* was ultimately broken into three layers of meaning, the first being the geographical and symbolic emphasis on the *xiang* 乡. On the one hand, *xiang* is described as encompassing the literal countryside as well as the sentiments of concern over its loss amidst urbanization. On the other hand, *xiang* also represents a more general concept of “hometown,” which, especially in relation to the supposed “modern condition” that includes subjective feelings and experiences of up/un-rootedness, refers to the proverbial hometown for which one yearns but to which one cannot “return” (Wang, Chen, Lin, & Wang, 2018, pp. 2-3). The second aspect of *xiangchou* is therefore its affective element of *chou* 愁. *Chou*, according to Wang et al. (2018), is described by some scholars as a general sense of “spiritual sorrow,” whereas others describe it as a “cultural memory of having lived in harmony with nature” (p. 3). Other scholars, meanwhile, argue that *chou* represents not only a tender memory, but also a *collective*

experience; specifically, a “cultural feeling” *wenhuaganshou* 文化感受, a sense of “cultural identity” *wenhuarentonggan* 文化认同感, and even a form of “cultural inspiration” or “cultural enlightenment” *wenhuaqidi* 文化启迪 (Wang, Chen, Lin, & Wang, 2018, p. 3). In other words, Heyang, as well as the other villages and small towns across China’s rural landscape – including those that have physically ‘disappeared’ or that have been administratively swallowed into other administrative orbits (see chapter 1, pp. 18-21) – are therefore the *spatio-cultural* representations of the ‘home.’ This ‘home’ is the object of an individual, collective, and even civilizational sense of *chou*. More than anguish and concern, this *chou*, meanwhile, is a cultural rooting and grounding that anchors ‘identity’ to the ‘soil;’ and indeed, to invoke Fei Xiaotong, an identity ‘from the soil.’

Finally, the third aspect of *xiangchou* is the *experiencing* of it. Wang et al. (2018) summarize the literature on how *xiangchou* is experienced as such:

From the perspective of people caught in the processes of urbanization, Ye Qiang indicates that *xiangchou* is, on the one hand, the *xiangchou* of the urban and the suburban, and on the other hand, *xiangchou* is the experience of migrant workers and those who [migrate] to make a living. From the perspective of the individual and the collective, Dou Zhiping points out that there is individual *xiangchou*, collective *xiangchou*, as well as the *xiangchou* of the entire nation. Based on the necessary conditions to produce *xiangchou*, Geng Bo points out that the target subjectivity to experience *xiangchou* are those who have left their hometowns but have gained social recognition in a foreign place; whereas Zhou Shangyi believes that even those who have never left home can experience *xiangchou*, and that to only attribute *xiangchou* to the lived experience of those who have physically left home is to overlook its moral significance. (Wang, Chen, Lin, & Wang, 2018, p. 3)

These diverse forms of *experiencing xiangchou* described above correlate to the various case studies presented throughout this dissertation. From Chapters 1 and 2, *xiangchou* is experienced as the umami scent of the *shaobing* from Mrs. Zhu’s snack stall, it is the tour of the village

through its myths and between its ancient walls. In fact, *xiangchou* is also my own journey, both personal and intellectual, from Vancouver, to Oxford, and to Heyang, as much as it is the “*xiangchou* industries” that the county cadres, introduced in chapter 3, hoped to coin as a way to gain recognition for Jinyun. *Xiangchou* belongs to Heyang’s duck breeders, tour guides, and other migrants discussed in chapter 4, as well as the likes of Mr. Tang, whose factory I toured in chapter 5. Finally, *xiangchou* is also the feelings of ennui and concerns that have erupted from ‘ruptured inner landscapes’ (L. Zhang, 2020), and which have led to the proliferation of *xiangchou* literature, vicarious social media ‘sojourns’ into rural idylls, and to the enacted ‘returns’ and ‘escapes’ of the return youths profiled in chapter 6.

Indeed, it is the “separation from the soil” that creates the *chou* for the *xiang*. This in turn has engendered the subjective experiencing and feeling of *xiangchou*. Yet, since its ‘incorporation’ into official discourse, it is also this very concept of *xiangchou* that is an especially effective term employed and deployed to create, legitimize, and justify policies for the ‘development’ and transformation of the *xiang*, within a developmental juncture that has created much *chou* across the urban-rural landscape and the bodies, minds, and souls of those who live within or who are suspended in-between. Ironically, while the affective nature of *xiangchou* makes it an effective ‘mobilizing’ discourse and ‘call to action,’ it is equally its highly subjective (read: ambiguous) meaning that creates tension within the very concept of not only *xiangchou* itself, but the task of ‘rural revitalization’ within a still predominantly urban-centric conception of ‘development’ and ‘modernization.’ In attempts to clear some of these ambiguities, I therefore propose a further distancing of *xiangchou* from the term ‘nostalgia,’ as it is its most commonly associated term, and I do so not as a claim of ‘Chineseness’ or cultural distinction, *per se*, but rather as an academic exercise to further convey the significance of

*xiangchou* amid various ‘crises’ and, critically, to highlight its potential as a concept that can help move beyond them.

### 7.2.2. On ‘Nostalgia’ and Xiangchou

I noticed that in the attempt put forth by Wang et al. (2018) to not only define and understand *xiangchou*, but also to claim its use in guiding ‘development,’ they still translate the term directly as “nostalgia” or even “nostalgic homesickness.” In fact, their article began with the criticism that research on *xiangchou* within mainland Chinese circles is very much still nascent and lagging behind its western counterparts, namely, studies engaging with “nostalgia” and “nostalgic homesickness” (Wang, Chen, Lin, & Wang, 2018, p. 1). To be sure, this is by no means a denial of the obvious similarities between the words *xiangchou* and ‘nostalgia;’ there is ample reason for why ‘nostalgia’ is frequently used as a direct translation for *xiangchou*. In fact, understanding the significance of ‘nostalgia’ within Western academic sociocultural and even political thought adds further credence to the establishing of *xiangchou* as its own unique *keyword*.

Indeed, what is interesting about the relationship between the two terms is the fact that while *xiangchou* is geographically and culturally rooted to the ‘*xiang*’ – the literal or proverbial ‘hometown/village’ – the concept of ‘nostalgia’ does not necessarily stray far from the ‘home’ either. Derived from Ancient Greek, but widely acknowledged as having been first written about by a Swiss medical student, ‘nostalgia’ (νοσταλγία) is comprised of *nostos* (νόστος), meaning “a return home,” and *álgos* (ἄλγος), for “pain” or “suffering.” According to Barbara Cassin (2016), “nostalgia” came to be as a way to describe the homesickness that Swiss mercenaries suffered while serving under Louis XIV in France. In its earliest iterations, “nostalgia” was

meant to be spoken of in a similar fashion as “neuralgia,” and it was used to designate an illness (Cassin, 2016, p. 5) – an illness characterized by a sense of detachment or displacement; rooted in the heart and mind, manifested through physical and psychological pain, and, at the time, a question of military concern.

However, nostalgia was not just a medical diagnosis reserved for soldiers battling abroad in the name of their homelands. In the first half of 19<sup>th</sup> century France, for instance, nostalgia was “an affliction that doctors regarded as potentially fatal, contagious, and somehow deeply connected to French life” (Roth, 1991, p. 7). In “Dying of the Past,” Michael Roth (1991) explains how by the 1830s, a consensus had even been reached within the French medical sphere on the basic characteristics of the nostalgia disease. He summarizes this phenomenon as such:

The major symptom [of nostalgia] was seen as an excessive attachment to something in the past, usually, but not necessarily, one’s native soil or one’s family. The disease could strike both men and women, and it was found in various age groups... A multitude of widely varying circumstances could become ‘predisposing causes of nostalgia’... Indeed, virtually anything could trigger the onset of the disease. (Roth, 1991, pp. 11-12)

By the 1870s, however, nostalgia was more or less dropped from the medical world and instead characterized as an “imaginary disease,” partly due to the advancement of medicine and technology. Another reason for its de-medicalization was its perceived disappearance from society altogether. According to doctors of the time, “nostalgia was erased by the developments of industrialization and centralization” (Roth, 1991, p. 23), as such forces of historical change towards ‘progress’ and all the appendages and luxuries that came with *la Belle Époque* helped fill the voids that were earlier the cause of that sense of loss and longing – nostalgia – amongst the general public.

Yet, while progress was seen by physicians as the ‘cure’ for nostalgia, the irony is not lost on Roth as he writes:

Nineteenth century French medicine came to see historical progress as the cure for nostalgia and the conditions giving rise to it. Ironically enough, psychoanalysis would come to regard progress itself as a symptom of nostalgic desire. (Roth, 1991, p. 24)

In other words, nostalgia, while no longer necessarily considered as a pathological ailment, was instead considered a neurological manifestation of pain and/or sorrow, a reaction towards forces or processes of change, physical or emotional displacement, alienation, and even a sense of popular malaise towards the sociopolitical climate of the times. It was, and remains to be, “an essential aspect of normal desire” (Roth, 1991, p. 24). Nostalgia has been and remains to be an important cultural trope, with various key themes central to nostalgic rhetoric including the notion of “a Golden Age and a subsequent Fall, the story of Homecoming, and the pastoral” (Tannock, 1995, p. 454). Even more recently, nostalgia has surged across popular culture as a coping mechanism within a post-pandemic world (Zhou, et al., 2021; Ome & Paz, 2021; Sinker, 2021). In “Nostalgia Critique,” Stuart Tannock (1995) writes that nostalgia works as a “periodizing emotion” that marks a clear delineation between “that was then, and this is now” (Tannock, 1995, p. 456). While recognizing the dangers of nostalgia as a coopt-able force and itself a “reactionary and sentimental illusion” (Tannock, 1995, p. 461; see also Kenny, 2017), Tannock (1995) ultimately argues that “nostalgia should equally be recognized as a valid way of constructing and approaching the past – recognized, that is, as a general structure of feeling, present in, and important to individuals and communities of all social groups” (p. 461). Scholars have been championing the effects of nostalgia as a powerful and positive psychological resource that can, for instance, promote social goals, help maintain social relationships, foster a

sense of social connectivity and belonging, and preserve meaning, especially amidst periods of turmoil and rapid change (Routledge, Wildschut, Sedikides, Juhl, & Arndt, 2012; Abeyta, Routledge, & Juhl, 2015). *Xiangchou*, I argue, has the potential to carry a similar effect and serve as a similar resource. Within both positive and negative evaluations of nostalgia, however, is the general acceptance that it is, firstly, a “structure of feeling,” and secondly, that there is embedded within it the temporal quality of “pastness.” As a structure of feeling, nostalgia is therefore what Williams (1977) describes as a “social experienc[e] *in solution*” (p. 133) – not fully *precipitated* as a Culture with a capital ‘C,’ but whose presence is salient across forms of cultural communication. Nostalgia’s anchoring to a “pastness” suggests a rupture or a break – indeed, a ‘periodizing’ of time; and as a structure of feeling, it is a ‘pastness’ experienced and/or (re)constructed through memories and encountered through arts and “ordinary affects” (Stewart, 2007).

In fact, nostalgia as a “structure of feeling” has been widely applied by scholars to discuss various subjective experiences within modern and contemporary China, and indeed, various forms of ‘nostalgia’ have existed across the tumultuous landscape of competing histories, ideologies, and condensed periods of rapid, social change. Notably, this includes various forms of ‘red nostalgia’ (see Chapter 6, p. 259), as well as a general sense of nostalgia discussed at length by cultural critics including Dai Jinhua and Wang Ban, which colored the screens and pages of literary works throughout the 1980s to early 2000s. From red to sepia-toned, the countryside has been a central object of nostalgic desire. The issue, however, is that this nostalgic structure of feeling ultimately reifies the ‘pastness’ of rurality. This reification of ‘pastness,’ in turn, not only reinforces the inequalities between the urban and the rural, but it also serves as a way for this inequality to be justified, internalized, and personified.

### 7.2.3. The Chinese Countryside as a Target of “Nostalgic” Desire

In her monograph on rural migrant women, Tamara Jacka (2006) describes how many of her interlocutors in Beijing used narratives of homesickness and nostalgia as a way to express, consciously or not, a simultaneous attachment and disdain for their rural hometowns. As she explains, such narratives invariably frame the countryside as a place of ‘innocence’ that is set in the past, while in contrast, the city is seen as a place where her interlocutors envisioned, or at least desired their futures to lie, despite the hardship they undergo as migrant workers. In Jacka’s (2006) words, nostalgia, when expressed in this context, “very firmly puts the rural home in the past, and that makes a clear identification of the narrator’s past, rural self as being that of a child” (p. 127). Conversely, the city is viewed as a place of sophistication that is more ‘mature’ (Jacka, 2006, p. 125). Within this framework, it is assumed that the desiring subject, the rural migrant, has undergone a form of self-transformation by placing the ‘countryside’ as her object for nostalgic desire. By having relocated to the city or a place perceived to be more ‘modern’ and more ‘advanced’ than her rural place of origin, the subject has ‘grown out of’ the countryside, a place that is consequently perceived to be ‘static’ and unchanging.

Similarly, in her study on the concept of “technomobility” in China, Cara Wallis (2013) argued how her interlocutors – also rural migrant women in Beijing – framed their journey to the country’s capital “as an opportunity both for self-development and for an escape from an ‘undeveloped’ rural home” (p. 64). This quest for self-development through rural to urban migration “is also an entry into an imagined modernity – constructed as urban in opposition to rural ‘tradition’ – that promises personal transformation and access to a new type of life” (Wallis, 2013, p. 64). However, personal desires to remain in the city are, more often than not, overridden

by institutional and legal constraints that eventually render remaining difficult or impossible. Moreover, societal expectations – often shaped through a discourse of both national and personal development – predestine their journeys as eventually needing to return to their rural hometowns (Xiang, 2006). As I discuss in chapter 5, while rural migrants are critical to supplying the labor force that fuels urban economies and the propulsions of modernity, their dispensability is equally as important to ensure the machineries involved in creating these urbanities and modernities are not overwhelmed. That is, while the entrance of rural migrants into the urban workforce is critical to sustaining the hegemonic discourse of development as being urban; the return of surplus labor back to the countryside is also necessary to sustain this development. From an individual standpoint, returning to the countryside is an inevitable fate for many, and contrary to the first leg of their journey outwards, this return is hardly seen as a form of progression. Rather, the almost inevitable return of rural migrants to their places of origin is framed both at the societal and personal level as a withdrawal from the city back to the countryside, *where they belong*.

As Jacka (2006) articulates, the narratives of nostalgia expressed by or even imposed upon rural migrants feed into this discourse of development by maintaining the countryside as a spatial and temporal antithesis to places considered as more urban. To this point, I reinvoké Xiang Biao (2006), who argues that even the concept of being “left behind” is not so much to emphasize those that “could have been brought along,” rather, it is to highlight those waiting for migrants’ return. This “waiting,” I argue, is a point that extends to include entire villages like Heyang, wherein its survival and development depends almost entirely upon the cyclical patterns of its residents’ migration and return. Within this context, the nostalgic “structure of feeling” is used to maintain and reinforce the status quo of a carefully balanced imbalance that

Jacka (2006) calls a “denial of coevalness” between the urban and the rural.

The allure that pulls rural subjects into the cities and the pressures that eventually push them reluctantly or defeatedly back into the countryside reflects “a tragic failure on the part of the state to take concrete steps to make the countryside a more desirable place to live” (Jacka, 2006, p. 129). Conversely, this is also articulated by Mun Young-Cho (2009), who argues that there remained a significant gap between the state’s goals of better absorbing migrant laborers into their host-cities, and the realities of ongoing inequalities that perpetuate migrants’ “forced flexibility.” According to Natalia Ollus (2016), “migrant workers end up in situations of forced flexibility where their lack of options becomes masked as flexibility: a willingness to take any job on any terms” (p. 38). In other words, the quality of ‘flexibility’ – an otherwise enviable luxury for the ‘modern citizen’ – becomes imposed upon the most socially and economically vulnerable when they have no other choice but to be flexible. More specific to the Chinese context, Cho (2009) defined “forced flexibility” as “a troubling way of life in which in-between lives crossing urban and rural areas are forced rather than chosen along with the intersection of personal and broader social vicissitudes” (pp. 53-54). Cho’s work, published during the Hu Jintao era (2002-2012), was focused on the story of Aunt Sun, who was described and presented as an elderly widow with a rural background and two adult children, both migrant laborers as well. Aunt Sun lived and labored long-term as a rag-picker in the cities, making pennies a day. She was landless. With neither any claims to land in her late-husband’s rural hometown nor an urban *hukou*, she struggled to find a permanent sense of ‘home’ and ‘belonging’ in both a rural and urban setting. As Cho (2009) analyzes, this forced Aunt Sun to be ‘flexible;’ it forced her to be easily relocatable, disposable, and uprootable.

In the case of many of Heyang’s migrants, however, their flexibility is not necessarily a

crossing between urban and rural boundaries (spatial and social) – rather, their “in-betweenness” can be understood as a limbo between their statuses and presences as being ‘at home,’ *zaijiali* 在家里, and ‘away from home,’ *zaiwaimian* 在外面 (see Chapter 5, pp. 201-201). Through my interviews with and learnings from locals, what I found to be the case for many who have out-migrated and returned to Heyang in various capacities is that the city is not necessarily seen as the place of their futures. Not to mention the fact that, instead of leaving the countryside for a “sojourn to the city” (see Jacka, 2006, pp. 128-130), many left from Heyang to end up in other rural and periurban spaces where they *become farmers elsewhere*. In effect, it is by returning to the home village where they no longer need to do work considered more *xinku* 辛苦, a term which denotes suffering through bitterness and hardship and a term that one of Jacka’s (2006) interlocutors attributed specifically to doing agricultural labor in her rural hometown (p. 124). As it was described to me by many of my interlocutors, enduring hardship while out-migrated was not necessarily to find a better life elsewhere, but their language communicated more strongly a desire to work hard to eventually return to a more comfortable life in Heyang. Their in-betweenness, in other words, was never one of ‘identity,’ of being neither-here-nor-there, of being neither-urban-nor-rural. Despite their statuses as ‘migrant’ and despite their ‘forced flexibility,’ there is an understanding of the ‘self’ that is first and foremost as a ‘Heyang *ren*,’ a person of Heyang. At least from my interviews and encounters with various informants within the village, there was a genuine attachment, longing, and desire to *go home*. I am aware, of course, that these were sentiments harbored predominantly by the post-70s generations, and that the vast majority of China’s youth – as with youth around the world – prefer urban lifestyles and amenities. The point, however, is that the de-coupling of rurality from perceptions of ‘backwardness’ and ‘pastness’ creates more acceptance for desires to ‘return to the countryside,’

and the language of *xiangchou* has helped open a more imaginative space for its ‘development,’ which is demonstrated by the case study of the *fanxiangqingnian*, further discussed below. The challenge, however, is how to remain, as many still struggle to make a living in Heyang.

### 7.3. What is *xiangchou*, to whom does it belong?

The more recent incorporation of *xiangchou* into the state’s latest discourse of Rural Revitalization therefore carries a different purpose than “nostalgia.” In particular, applied in the context of Heyang’s development and the revival of its industry, *xiangchou* is mobilized and endorsed from the top-down to dislodge the otherwise static countryside from its temporal and developmental bind. *Xiangchou* aspires towards, at least in the most idealistic sense, a village that *can* progress. Whether or not this has been properly applied and realized, however, remains to be seen.

#### 7.3.1. Villagers’ Chou for the Xiang

Throughout my fieldwork, it was predominantly disgruntlement and disapproval that I heard from village elders with regards to the whole tourism endeavor. Those like Zhu Yueheng and Zhu Fazhao, (introduced in chapter 2, p. 64), who had been relocated from their heritage dwellings to the “new village” were especially critical, as they felt they were dispossessed by the local state, and that their dis-/relocation meant not only that they did not receive any benefits from the tourism enterprise, but that their physical move beyond the ancient walls that they had always known made them feel like *waidiren* 外地人, ‘outsiders.’ Yet, their disapproval was not necessarily against the preservation and further development of their village, *per se*. Rather, it was the feeling of alienation that came with the lack of communication from the local state and

their forced compliance to leave their ‘homes,’ even if, materially, their new dwellings were more spacious, furnished, and insulated against the bitter winter cold and blistering summer heat. To reiterate a point made by Fazhao,

*xiangchou* means *duodianchouchou* [多点愁愁 to have more to anguish or concern over]. *Xiangchou* means that they [officials] come to do tourism, and us villagers have more to *chou*. Us villagers are very *chou* [concerned], you know. *Xiangchou* means to give villagers more to *chou*, we are so *chou*. (Interview, January 25, 2019, Heyang Village)

For villagers like Yueheng and Fazhao, therefore, *xiangchou* is borne out of their perceived ‘un-belonging’ from their hometown; it means a lingering and lasting concern over their home, which they feel they no longer have any say over its development and future. To them, *xiangchou* is a reminiscence over the ‘life’ that once was, and this is not necessarily a ‘life’ that is attached to a ‘pastness’ in the sense of the ‘things lost behind in the name of modernity,’ rather, it is a life that they viewed as having valued certain facets of human interaction and culture over others. The most poignant example of the ‘Heyang’ they feel the most *xiangchou* for is depicted by Fazhao and Yueheng, who engage with me in the following exchange:

Yueheng: The vegetable market has been chased out, and no one’s allowed to open one there. Otherwise, the people who had snack stalls there could have benefited a bit [from the tourism].

Qian: Why did they tear them down? Are they worried about cleanliness?

Yueheng: I don’t know. It’s not dirty. All the vegetable stalls have been chased out.

Fazhao: Even the meat vendor has to now sell [his produce] from the back of his truck. I don’t know why they tore down [their stall]. I haven’t a clue what they’re doing. It’s not just us complaining. Even others from outside the village are saying this about Heyang. They’re asking, what’s wrong with Heyang people now?

Yueheng: *Waidiren* [‘outsiders’] say that the vendors and stalls shouldn’t have been

forced out. *Waidiren* don't even have a place to buy a snack when they visit. Groceries would be easier here too. But now they don't even have a place to buy produce in Heyang.

Qian: Who chased them out?

Yueheng: Well, the MC, of course. The VDC and the MC are pretty much the same. (Interview, Heyang Village, January 25, 2019)

Yueheng and Fazhao are describing the change that they had witnessed take place outside Heyang's main gate. Over the years of tourism development, the entrance of the village had undergone a significant 'facelift.' Where there is now a glossy tourist reception hall, was once a bustling breakfast hall and marketplace, a place where locals would gather at the crack of dawn to do their basic shopping for fresh produce and meats, grab some breakfast – typically a combination of a bowl of wontons and a *shaobing*, a bowl of sweet or savoury soy milk with a fried dough stick, *youtiao* 油条; or a bowl of local noodles, *tumian* 土面, with a boiled egg or two – and catch up on the latest chitchat before getting on with their days. As the two described, however, the market had been completely converted, and the other vendors that once surrounded the building had been told by the local officials to leave. “The main issue,” said Yueheng, “is that all the snack booths are gone, and people are upset, even farmers who pass by after tilling their lands could once grab a bite to eat, but not now, there's nowhere to go.”

The Heyang in their minds, therefore, was teeming with life, commerce, and, in fact, a sense of hospitality that catered to both *heyangren* and *waidiren*, which Fazhao further emphasized when he brings up how complaints over these changes to Heyang are echoed in neighboring villages too. “People from outside are now saying that Heyang has gotten worse,” Fazhao adds. Rumor has it that that villagers from outside believe “Heyang is going to eat bitterness” and have a difficult time. To this, Fazhao recalls a conversation he had with a friend

from a nearby village named Gehu 葛湖村:

I asked [my friend], why do you think Heyang people will eat bitterness? Then that old man just went off. He said how he used to come to Heyang all the time. If he came to visit relatives in Heyang, and if the relatives weren't home, he would still have somewhere to rest and grab a bite to eat. But now, the food stalls are all gone. That's what he said. The restaurants that are here now, they're all prohibitively expensive. In the past, there was competition in the market, and things were much tastier too. (Interview, Heyang Village, January 25, 2019)

Fazhao looked defeated. Indeed, he had much *chou* over his Heyang. The only thing that remained from the Heyang that they knew, was Mrs. Zhu's *shaobing* stall.

### 7.3.2. A Final 'Tour' Through Heyang

In January 2020, before the public had been fully made aware of COVID-19, before the virus had been declared a pandemic, I visited Heyang very briefly whilst on a family visit. I was there to say a solemn farewell to my uncle, who was in the terminal stage of throat cancer. He was prideful and ashamed to be seen in such a state of weakness; this pride was reflected in my grandfather as well, who, for the past decade, had also been in a rapid state of physical and mental decline. Little did I know, this would be the last time I would see both men, the same men that had herded hundreds of ducks and traversed hundreds of kilometers by foot, some distant decades ago. Days before the Chinese New Year – which turned out to be a most unconventional one spent in lockdown – I went to Heyang to see how things had or had not changed since my last visit almost a year earlier. There had once been word on the grapevine that the old marketplace Fazhao and Yueheng had so passionately lamented over was being torn down so that it could be replaced by a new and more modern version. However, after the village had applied for the designation of a '4A' tourist site, such plans were no longer heard again. I

was curious to see what had happened to the space. By the time I reached the ancient archway, I was greeted by the new visitors' reception center. I was told it had just come into operation a few weeks prior. Sitting above its front doors boasted a gleaming placard, celebrating the village's successful attainment of the coveted '4A' designation.

Heyang is complex, and its development as part of the *xiangchou* economy has been even more so. To its credit, attaining the status of '4A' is certainly an achievement. At least on paper, it opens more doors of possibility for the village's flourishing as a sought-after site to visit and sojourn in. It means moving up on the chain of 'value' and potentially gaining more access to resources from higher up the chain of bureaucracy. Given that these developments are still relatively new – not to mention, potentially delayed or stalled due to the pandemic – it would be interesting to revisit Heyang in a few years to follow-up on how, if at all, the attainment of '4A' amidst this overarching developmental “turning point” impacts the village's revitalization. Indeed, a “turning point,” in essence, defines an ongoing process that is at the precipice of formation. A “turning point” flirts with possibilities of a yet-to-be and may-or-may-not-be difference in 'trajectory.' It is arguable that Heyang has reached or is reaching a turning point of its own.

What was certain at the time of this writing, however, was that the *xiangchou* tourism industry had changed the landscape of work, even if on a small scale. For the younger informants that I got to interview, namely, Zhu Yjia, Li Yinhui, Zhu Hufen, and Zhu Yunlin (see chapter 4, p. 148), the revitalization and *xiangchou* industry endeavor did give them the opportunity to remain home and make a living. At least at the time of our encounter, they could pursue and fulfill other goals and responsibilities without the need to leave, and, more importantly, they could even witness and contribute to the development of their own hometown.

These five interlocuters were part of what was a still-small minority of locals who were employed in the tourism enterprise and/or who profited directly from it. Ironically, whilst being able to evade their own feelings of homesickness by working in Heyang, Yinwei, Hufen, and Yunlin became the ones directly performing and selling *xiangchou* in their roles as client-facing tour guides. In fact, Yunlin has even participated in a county-wide “tour guide competition,” where, according to her, judges allocated bonus points to guides who incorporated the term *xiangchou* into their orations. She also mentioned how, after the final scores were revealed, the judging panel announced to all participants that while receiving tourists in their respective job sites, they should try their best to incorporate this concept into their tours and make *xiangchou* part of the tourism experience. When asked to clarify how she incorporates *xiangchou* into her tours, she said the following:

Was it not Xi Dada that said it first?<sup>63</sup> [He said] ‘see mountains, gaze at waters, and keep *xiangchou* in mind.’ There is a specific angle in the *guminju* where, from the Wall of Horse Heads [see Figure 1, p. 12], one can literally see mountains and waters. It is right in the middle of the *guminju*, so this central location is *xiangchou*. I [tell my tour groups] that such a site is precisely where one can see mountains, gaze at waters, and keep *xiangchou* in mind. (Group Interview, February 23, 2020, Heyang village)

Yunlin’s usage of *xiangchou* is almost the most literal representation of Xi Jinping’s words, and it is highly illustrative of power in discourse as well as the power of discourse. That is, it is evident that her incorporation of *xiangchou* into her tours follows closely the state’s appropriation of the term, which saw to the merging of *xiangchou* as a “structure of feeling” with a hegemonic and top-down discourse of rural development. *Xiangchou* became a *cultural reality* that is at once a political and economic means for ‘development’ or ‘improvement’ of the village, as well as a lived reality for residents who are inevitably woven into the tourism

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<sup>63</sup> “Xi Dada”, or “Uncle Xi”, is a colloquialism used to refer to President Xi Jinping.

enterprise by virtue of being local rural residents, but who also possess their own forms of *xiangchou*.

The development of the village's tertiary sector of tourism is a means through which the village's economy can be diversified and become more self-sustaining and self-sufficient. By extension, and at least in theory, it should provide new jobs and opportunities to increase residents' livelihood. It should also be a way through which residents can reclaim their agency as stakeholders in the development and construction of their village's future. However, at the current juncture of Heyang's tourism development, there are still many glaring issues needing to be resolved, and, more importantly, it is not everyone who has equal access to these opportunities to work in tourism, or to work in Heyang at all. Although it may be premature to make the leap to clearly trace the emergence of new rural classes, the argument can be made, however, that new divisions along the lines of social status are beginning to form within the village as a result of or, at the very least, in relation to the tourism enterprise within the overarching emphasis on creating a 'thriving *Xiangchou* Industry.' As she mused over her place and role in Heyang, Yunlin even redefined and reclaimed what she believes her *xiangchou* to be when she expressed: "what is home? Home is a place I hate to my core, but if you say anything negative about Heyang, I will get angry.... Even if I am resentful towards Heyang, it is still my home. Perhaps, this is *xiangchou*" (Group Interview, February 23, 2019, Heyang Village).

Indeed, within the developmental context in which Cho's (2009) study took place, there was increased state action taken and attention paid to ensure better conditions and protection for migrants within their host cities. However, it was through Aunt Sun's life that Cho was able to illustrate how there remained a "significant gap" between top-down efforts and expressions of concern for migrants, and the enduring abandonment and discrimination that still permeated

the everyday lives of those like Aunt Sun, both in urban and rural areas. Writing in the context of the Xi-era, nearly a decade after Cho's work, this dissertation also illustrates a "significant gap" between top-down efforts and intentions and "on the ground" realities. Whereas Cho noted the state's effort to ensure and provide greater security for migrants in their host-cities as laborers, the case of Heyang illustrates a gap between top-down efforts to bring migrants back to their rural hometowns on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the necessary socioeconomic conditions that can retain and adequately absorb them. Although Heyang is neither a representative of the entire rural landscape, let alone a successful case of rural 'revitalization,' as a heritage-village, Heyang does, however, embody the tensions between the 'ossification' of culture and tradition and the inspirations that can be drawn from them. With the declining incentives once promised by migratory industries such as duck breeding, which is taking place in parallel with the continued – albeit, tortured – budding of tourism and the construction of "*xiangchou* industries" across the township and county, Heyang is also a village at the cusp of a potential demographic transition. It has become an arena where multiple strands of 'return' can be observed, but time will tell whether or not these 'returns' can be retained. Heyang simultaneously holds ambitions to become a thriving '*xiangchou* economy' on the one hand, and, in the words of the local state, a site that desires to retain 'a living village,' *yigehuodecunluo*, on the other. If it can find the ways to reconcile these two goals and work towards 'revitalization' with thriving industries and a thriving social and cultural ecosystem, then perhaps, it can demonstrate the potentialities of *xiangchou* and, more importantly, engender a 'modernity' that is truly rural.

Ultimately, from Yueheng to Yunlin, their imaginings of Heyang do not necessarily rest on a static imagery of a countryside that is temporally fixed to the past and permanently in a

state of being ‘lesser developed.’ By extension, their *xiangchou* is not the same nostalgic structure of feeling that is built upon an internalized ‘denial of coevalness.’ In fact, Yueheng and Fazhao’s ultimate *chou* for their *jiaxiang* 家乡, hometown, demonstrates their ultimate desire for the rekindling of a sense of community, indeed, for a ‘living village.’ Moreover, the former migrants’ and returnees’ relations to their place of origin are not necessarily hinged on a past, more juvenile version of the self either. In other words, with the flourishing of this tourism industry, there was a possibility to work for a future in present-day Heyang. For a small, but hopefully growing, number of residents, the tourism industry and the spillover effects of the county’s revitalization effort presented an alternative to *going out*, doing agriculture or aquaculture, and being idle. For the entire village of Heyang, the discourse of *xiangchou* helps engender the imagining of a village that is no longer viewed only through distortions of nostalgic memory; a village that is no longer left behind. The challenge, however, is how the state can rebuild a relationship with villagers whilst themselves being able to *jizhu xiangchou* – that is, “keep *xiangchou* in mind.”

#### 7.4. Final Reflections, Limitations, and Future Research

Inspired by the Extended Case Method, this dissertation has been an inquiry of multiple extensions, from the self to the site, from Xi to villager, from Heyang to Beijing and even to the Western world. Despite the effort towards ‘extension,’ however, there are, of course, several limitations to this study, including its scope, as it centres predominantly on one village. Not to mention the fact that Heyang is by no means a ‘model village,’ as it is neither as an exemplary case of ‘doing *xiangchou*’ nor as a ‘successful’ revitalization story, considering all its enduring struggles, conflicts, and yet-to-be-resolved-dilemma surrounding its very *purpose* as a village.

Moreover, despite Jinyun county's ambitions and excitement, it is hard to imagine that its "Jinyun Model of Revitalization" will, in fact, receive a mention by Xi Jinping at the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, currently scheduled for late 2022. However, Heyang's recognition as a key 'village for rural tourism' and its attainment of a '4A' site in 2020 is certainly a step towards that direction.

Moreover, my personal attachments to Heyang notwithstanding, writing this dissertation has been admittedly a challenging exercise of both self-restraint and self-reflection, as *xiangchou* is inherently an 'inward' looking and personal concept. The limitations of this study of course include my own reflexive biases, which have framed how I understand and even chose *xiangchou* as a point of study to begin with. However, I was deeply moved by Lomas' project of Positive Lexicography, which highlights not only the nuances and complexities of language, but also bring forth the most beautiful array of human emotions that may be particular to their cultural and developmental context, but which are ultimately universal in their underlying meaning, wisdoms, and sentiments. Beyond the mandarin speaking world, I see *xiangchou* as a multilayered emotion that is highly salient in the human experience. The challenge began, however, with not only understanding the term, but translating it to reflect its deeper and broader resonance. This dissertation therefore contributes to the growing body of literature within China to (re)define and understand *xiangchou*, and it is also one of the first attempts to do so in the English language. It provides a cross-cultural framework that can not only help make sense of a perceived developmental 'turning point' in China, but also help make sense of human desires and mechanisms of coping whilst living in increasingly complex 'modern' societies.

To restate, a turning point is an ongoing process that is at the precipice of formation; flirting with possibilities of a yet-to-be and may-or-may-not-be difference in 'trajectory.' Used

in this dissertation, the concept of a turning point marks a potential departure from an otherwise urban-biased developmental model that has helped couple the dominant constructions of ‘modernity’ to urbanity within China. The application of *xiangchou* helps widen the space for theoretical and even practical discussions on how the Chinese rural landscape can be productively and, ideally, symbiotically folded into China’s ongoing development. I posit *xiangchou* as a way through which the imagining and engendering of a “rural modernity” can be made possible, and which could be a potentially fruitful point of study for future research. In fact, there is much that remains to be explored in Heyang alone.

Moreover, inspired by, but also departing from Kate Merkel-Hess’ (2016) sophisticated inquiry into the ‘third way’ between the Republican and Communist factions during China’s civil war, I propose a deeper inquiry into the concept of a ‘rural modern,’ as opposed to the ‘modern rural,’ the latter which still retains trappings of the urban within modernity. *Xiangchou*, I argue, can provide an insightful lens into building a ‘modernity’ driven by both the “dull compulsions of economic relations” (Marx, 1852), and the “affective devotions of cultural attachments.” Although grounded in mainland Chinese experiences – and in a small village, no less – the research problematic presented in this dissertation necessarily concerns issues beyond China. Especially in a post-COVID-19 world, this research is anchored in an ancient earthly village and the intricate web of political economic and cultural forces that are struggling to revitalize it. At stake are not only China’s “turning point” in its developmental process, but also a turning point in the global developmental process. This dissertation therefore contributes to the broader discussions of what ‘revitalization’ could mean for the future of rural communities and urban-rural relations more broadly. Most ambitiously, I seek to understand *xiangchou* and its prominence as not only a ‘trendy’ – and ultimately, fleeting – ‘trope’ in the zeitgeist of

official and popular discourse, but I am interested in further exploring its potential of its longevity and applicability as a more culturally salient concept.

### **Epilogue: Revisiting the E-Commerce Courtyard**

I last spoke with Ye Dong in May 2020. He was in Heyang and I was in Vancouver. In addition to being separated by vast oceans and lands, Heyang also seemed an even more ‘distant land’ to me because of the fact that I was still living in a world consumed by the pandemic, whereas Ye Dong’s life in Heyang had already resumed to a ‘new-normal.’ “Things are totally normal here,” he said, after I gripped to him over WeChat about the extension of social-distancing and lockdown rules in Vancouver. “I forgot you were still stuck inside!”

After a strict but relatively effective period of national quarantine, the makeshift roadblock separating Heyang from the outside had been removed. By April 2020, the entire Jinyun more or less resumed its normal rhythm and functions. One by one, Heyang’s residents began trickling out once more, to salvage what had remained from their businesses pre-pandemic or to start completely anew. Meanwhile, much of the rest of the global community was still struggling with its own variations of lockdown. All the way in Western Canada, citizens were being encouraged to stay indoors and maintain social distancing, and whilst working alone from my own home office, converted out of a spare bedroom, I found myself scrolling through my WeChat feed with a tinge of envy as I saw how my peers in China had more or less resumed their lives.

I missed Heyang, and indeed, I felt nostalgic for the pre-pandemic days where I too sat wearing a comical number of layers of clothes alongside the entrepreneurs, as we all huddled around a comically small fan in the e-commerce courtyard. It was during my own experience of feeling malaise and isolation in a Vancouver under lockdown where I came across the online phenomenon known as “cottagecore:” a digital aesthetic community found on platforms such as North American TikTok, Instagram, and Tumblr (Jennings, 2020). According to Rebecca

Jennings (2020), “cottagecore” refers to an aesthetic taste built around a nostalgia-based romanticization of a western bucolic lifestyle, centering around “an escapist aesthetic dominated by meadows, teacups, and baby goats” (para. 2). Putting more cultural context to the rise of this online-based phenomenon, Jennings (2020) further articulates:

‘Cottagecore’ is just one of the dozens of iterations of movements fetishizing the countryside and coziness over the past few hundred years, and yet the glaringly obvious irony is that it is the first that has existed almost exclusively online, posted and participated in through a smartphone from cluttered apartments or suburban bedrooms. (para. 3)

In investigating the popularity of cottagecore, particularly amongst young women, Isabel Slone (2020) makes the point for the *New York Times* that youth affinity towards this aesthetic indicates “the yen for minimalism is finally waning and a desire for something wilder and more pastoral is beginning to take root” (para. 14). Whilst reading this, I could not help but to think back to Mr. Tang from Xinjian, and how he described to me his visions for *xiangchou* products – how he hoped to infuse ‘rural elements’ into modern minimalism. With little to do and nowhere to go for many days whilst quarantined in my own apartment, I thought also about the feelings of helplessness, worthlessness, and the unsettling nature of being completely idle embedded in the notion of having *meishigan*. Meanwhile, as cottagecore became even more popular during the pandemic that forced many to stay indoors and live out their outdoor fantasies online and through communities such as these, I also thought about “Hanfu mania,” and the ways through which many of China’s youth are using both online and offline methods to live out certain cultural nostalgic fantasies of their own. Even more, I thought about Ye Dong and the other young entrepreneurs who have taken the next step to literally leave their ‘regular’ lives to materialize their own romanticization of ‘country-living,’ but in the Chinese countryside,

*nongcun* 农村. As if an inside joke for myself and to myself, I made a mental note to call these phenomena *xiangchoucore*.

From the *Guardian*, to the ultra-chic *Paper Magazine* – the fashion and lifestyle magazine that arguably repurposed the term, “break the internet” to mean “going viral” – Li Ziqi was also at the center of the ‘cottagecore’ craze. Food critic Tejal Rao (2020) even wrote, supposedly from her own quarantine in New York, that the Do-it-yourself “pastoral fantasies” produced by Li Ziqi (Rao’s “Quarantine Queen”) became a “reliable source of escape and comfort” (Rao, 2020). “Chinese cottagecore,” as it became to be known, was folded into the aestheticized digital fantasies of audiences around the world. Interestingly, Kaila Yu (2020) highlights how Li Ziqi’s appeal can be summarized by a comment made by one of Li’s fans, which writes: “Deep down, I know this is how life is actually supposed to be” (para. 2). Likewise, Rao (2020) opined that Li Ziqi’s allure rests also in her self-sufficiency. Even more, she leaves her readership with much food for thought as she concludes her article with:

In isolation, watching Ms. Li gather rose petals and ripe tomatoes, I catch myself thinking, is this sequence set in the past, or the future? Are these videos a record of the collective food knowledge we’ve already lost, or an idealized vision of its recovery? (Rao, 2020, para. 24)

In other words, beyond aesthetics, the pastoral world created in Li Ziqi’s videos invite fantasies about lifestyles that value self-sufficiency and “living off the land” subsistence. Although highly romanticized, these are imagined to be practiced in China’s villages, and this desire for ‘slow living’ is in part what drove the *fanxiangqingnian* to Heyang’s ancient *siheyuan*, courtyards, in the first place.

In a way, the ‘return’ desired by these youth share certain motivations with the “back-to-the-land” movements across history. In his recently published doctoral dissertation on “back-

to-the-land” movements across American history, for instance, Jonathan Bowlder (2021) argues that various iterations of these movements are founded upon a “back-to-the-land” tradition that dates back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. In what is considered the “first wave” of “back-to-the-landers,” Bowlder (2021) joins several other scholars in describing how it was a response “to the tremendous social, cultural, and economic upheaval of the Gilded Age and early Progressive era” (p. 33; see also Jacob, 1997; Agnew, 2005; Brown, 2011; Miele, 2017; Adamik, 2020) The “second-generation” of “back-to-the-landers” in the 1920s and 30s, meanwhile, were “deeply concerned by the effects of mid-century industrialization and militarization on the natural world and worried that modern progress was leading to overpopulation and environmental degradation” (p. 10). Likewise, participants of the “third-generation” in the 1960s and 70s, were also motivated by a desire to “create rural and alternative social, economic, and political structures that would counter the effects of industrialization on labor conditions, human health, and economic systems and remedy the alienating influences of Cold War inequality on society and politics” (p. 12). At their core, the “back-to-the-land” movements are fundamentally *countercultural* quests for “the good life outside of cities and away from mainstream society” (Bowlder, 2021, p. 9). In fact, as Bowlder (2021) articulates, “as indicated in the very phrase *back to the land*, the movement attracted urban audiences who were uneasy with the pace of modern life” (p. 32). Although it was particularly a white middle-class America that was afflicted by this desire to “go back,” the parallels with the ‘returns’ and desires I described in contemporary China are significant.

In fact, the most literal, if not, the most radical, enactment of ‘rural return’ has been through the burgeoning of intentional communities, *gongshishequ* 共识社区, where villages and remote mountainsides have become the sites to practice and experiment with communal

and subsistence living, particularly in the form of eco-villages. Although relatively new to the Chinese social landscape, intentional communities (IC's) have a long history across North America and Europe, and they have long been theorized as forms of “cultural critiques” or as new social movements and modes of resistance (see for instance, Schehr, 1997; Brown S. L., 2002; Wallmeier, 2017; Rubin, 2021). In the context of contemporary China, a small minority of urban youth are choosing to embark on alternative ventures into ‘distant lands,’ and their withdrawal from mainstream society and its trappings can be understood through Philip Wallmeier’s (2017) concept of an “exit-variety of critique,”<sup>64</sup> where the act of “withdrawal” from mainstream society is not so much a sign of transgression and indignation, rather, a “reformist critique of mainstream society, calling for its transformation into a meaningful, communal, and sustainable order” (p. 149).

Although the whole ecosystem of ICs is growing in mainland China, the extent to which they can truly flourish and even become more widely ‘accepted’ in Chinese society, let alone in the eyes of the state, are still to be determined. In fact, ‘alternative rural dwellings’ for city-escapers have even been torn down by local authorities on the basis of their illegal construction (Lin, 2019) after the introduction of such policies as *sangaiyichai* 三改一拆 (see footnote 45, p.147). Nevertheless, a handful of IC's have emerged, many of which rent homestead land from local villagers and authorities (see Wang P., 2020 for a recent study on the emergence of IC's in Southern China). As one of the most established and well-known ICs, “Southern Living,” *Nanbushenghuo* 南部生活, has seen hundreds of different young faces since its establishment

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<sup>64</sup> Wallmeier’s research is based on a comparative analysis of ICs in the 1960s and present-day America. Although both are theorized as an “exit-variety of critique,” Wallmeier differentiates the two movements with the 1960s representing “radical critique” in ICs that are more experimental, versus the “reformist critique” in the more institutionalized ICs of today. Despite being a relatively novel movement, I view China’s IC’s as being more akin to the “reformist” camp.

in the village of Wangkeng in Fujian province. However, to the quiet dismay of its founder, Tang Guanghua – who has become somewhat of a poster child for China’s IC movement – many of Southern Living’s members practiced only a “watered-down” version of the anti-capitalist ethos that the IC was founded upon (Wang X. , 2021). Indeed, many youths have flocked to IC’s as well as other forms of ‘village-living’ not to ‘leave everything behind’ *per se*, rather to seek temporary escapes. In one sense, this is a more immersive and intensive form of ‘rural tourism’ and, ironically, a form of escapist or even spiritual consumption where the likes of Tang and other leaders of counterculture have themselves become objects for romanticization, less of emulation and embodiment. From Gao Xiaosong’s “anti-homeownerism” (discussed in chapter 6, p. 215), to the anti-capitalist manifestos produced and espoused by activists such as Tang Guanghua, these views are, at the end of the day, still perceived as ‘radical,’ rather than ‘reformist.’

It is worth highlighting, however, that while Yongming, Ye Dong, Zixiao, and Yangkai were highly critical and disillusioned by their brief ‘sojourns’ to the cities, their “exit” from the “mainstream” to the e-commerce courtyard, was neither wholly “countercultural” nor anti-state. In fact, the very existence of the courtyard – both as a lasting heritage site and as a commercial site – was an outcome of state-led developmental policies. Branded under the umbrella of *xiangchou*, it was a political-economically motivated decision made by cadres for various reasons, including personal gain and career advancement, and as part of a chain of command from Beijing to Heyang. Indeed, the ‘tricking down’ of *xiangchou*. In this way, and especially if the necessary resources, infrastructure, and education are available to further encourage and espouse practices of sustainable and slow living, can *xiangchou* become a lens through which a

tangible “back-to-the-land” movement can be imagined as both desired from the bottom-up and encouraged from the top-down?

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